

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."

The roll call continued. Jamie glowed when Lily chose him before half the adults were taken. Even Maggie and Jeb were picked for teams. The numbers were even until Lucina came back with Jared, her two small boys bouncing in excitement. Jared had a shiny new soccer ball in his hand; he held it out, and Isaiah, the older child, jumped up and down trying to knock it from his hand.

“Wanda?” Lily asked.

I shook my head and pointed to my leg.

“Right. Sorry.”

I’m good at soccer, Mel grumbled. Well, I used to be.

I can hardly walk, I reminded her.

“I think I’ll sit this one out,” Ian said.

“No,” Wes complained. “They’ve got Kyle and Jared. We’re dead without you.”

“Play,” I told him. “I’ll... I’ll keep score.”

He looked at me, his lips pressed into a thin, rigid line. “I’m not really in the mood for playing a game.”

“They need you.”

He snorted.

“C’mon, Ian,” Jamie urged.

“I want to watch,” I said. “But it will be... boring if one team has too much advantage.”

“Wanda.” Ian sighed. “You really are the worst liar I’ve ever met.”

But he got up and started stretching with Wes.

Paige set up goalposts, four lanterns.

I tried to get to my feet-I was right in the middle of the field. Nobody noticed me in the dim light. All around, the atmosphere was upbeat now, charged with anticipation. Jeb had been right. This was something they needed, odd as it seemed to me.

I was able to get onto all fours, and then I pulled my good leg forward so I was kneeling on the bad. It hurt. I tried to hop up onto my good leg from there. My balance was all off, thanks to the awkward weight of my sore leg.

Strong hands caught me before I could fall on my face. I looked up, a little rueful, to thank Ian.

The words caught in my throat when I saw that it was Jared whose arms held me up.

“You could have just asked for help,” he said conversationally.

“I -” I cleared my throat. “I should have. I didn’t want to...”

“Call attention to yourself?” He said the words as if he were truly curious. There was no accusation in them. He helped me hobble toward the cave entrance.

I shook my head once. “I didn’t want to... make anyone do anything, out of courtesy, that they didn’t want to do.” That didn’t explain it exactly right, but he seemed to understand my meaning.

“I don’t think Jamie or Ian would begrudge you a helping hand.”

I glanced back at them over my shoulder. In the low light, neither had noticed I was gone yet. They were bouncing the ball off their heads, and laughing when Wes caught it in the face.

“But they’re having fun. I wouldn’t want to interrupt that.”

Jared examined my face. I realized I was smiling in affection.

“You care about the kid quite a bit,” he said.

“Yes.”

He nodded. “And the man?”

“Ian is... Ian believes me. He watches over me. He can be so very kind... for a human.” Almost like a soul, I’d wanted to say. But that wouldn’t have sounded like the compliment it was to this audience.

Jared snorted. “For a human. A more important distinction than I’d realized.”

He lowered me to the lip of the entrance. It made a shallow bench that was more comfortable than the flat floor.

“Thank you,” I told him. “Jeb did the right thing, you know.”

“I don’t agree with that.” Jared’s tone was milder than his words.

“Thank you also-for before. You didn’t have to defend me.”

“Every word was the truth.”

I looked at the floor. “It’s true that I would never do anything to hurt anyone here. Not on purpose. I’m sorry that I hurt you when I came here. And Jamie. So sorry.”

He sat down right beside me. his face thoughtful. “Honestly...” He hesitated. “The kid is better since you

came. I'd sort of forgotten what his laugh sounded like."

We both listened to it now, echoing above the lower pitch of adult laughter.

"Thank you for telling me that. It's been my... biggest worry. I hoped I hadn't damaged anything permanently."

"Why?"

I looked up at him, confused.

"Why do you love him?" he asked, his voice still curious but not intense.

I bit my lip.

"You can tell me. I'm... I've..." He couldn't find the words to explain. "You can tell me," he repeated.

I looked at my feet as I answered. "In part because Melanie does." I didn't peek to see if the name made him flinch. "Remembering him the way she does... that's a powerful thing. And then, when I met him in person..." I shrugged. "I can't not love him. It's part of my... the very makeup of these cells to love him. I hadn't realized before how much influence a host had on me. Maybe it's just human bodies. Maybe it's just Melanie."

"She talks to you?" He kept his voice even, but I could hear the strain now.

"Yes."

"How often?"

"When she wants to. When she's interested."

"How about today?"

"Not much. She's... kind of mad at me."

He barked out a surprised laugh. "She's mad? Why?"

"Because of..." Was there such a thing as double jeopardy here? "Nothing."

He heard the lie again and made the connection.

"Oh. Kyle. She wanted him to fry." He laughed again. "She would."

"She can be... violent," I agreed. I smiled, to soften the insult.

It was no insult to him. "Really? How?"

"She wants me to fight back. But I... I can't do that. I'm not a fighter."

"I can see that." He touched my battered face with one fingertip. "Sorry."

"No. Anyone would do the same. I know what you must have felt."

"You wouldn't -"

"If I were human, I would. Besides, I wasn't thinking of that... I was remembering the Seeker."

He stiffened.

I smiled again, and he relaxed a little. "Mel wanted me to throttle her. She really hates that Seeker. And I can't... find it in myself to blame her."

"She's still searching for you. Looks like she had to return the helicopter, at least."

I closed my eyes, clenched my fists, and concentrated on breathing for several seconds.

"I didn't used to be afraid of her," I whispered. "I don't know why she scares me so much now. Where is she?"

"Don't worry. She was just up and down the highway yesterday. She won't find you."

I nodded, willing myself to believe.

"Can you... can you hear Mel now?" he murmured.

I kept my eyes closed. "I'm... aware of her. She's listening very hard."

"What's she thinking?" His voice was just a whisper.

Here's your chance, I told her. What do you want to tell him?

She was cautious, for once. The invitation unsettled her. Why? Why does he believe you now?

I opened my eyes and found him staring at my face, holding his breath.

"She wants to know what happened to make you... different now. Why do you believe us?"

He thought for a moment. "An... accumulation of things. You were so... kind to Walter. I've never seen anyone but Doc be that compassionate. And you saved Kyle's life, where most of us would have let him fall just to protect ourselves, intended murder aside. And then you're such an appalling liar." He laughed once. "I kept trying to see these things as evidence of some grand plot. Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow and feel that way again."

Mel and I flinched.

"But when they started attacking you today... well, I snapped. I could see in them everything that

shouldn't have been in me. I realized I already did believe, and that I was just being obstinate. Cruel. I think I've believed since... well, a little bit since that first night when you put yourself in front of me to save me from Kyle." He laughed as if he didn't think Kyle was dangerous. "But I'm better at lying than you are. I can even lie to myself."

"She hopes you won't change your mind. She's afraid you will."

He closed his eyes. "Mel."

My heart thudded faster in my chest. It was her joy that sped it, not mine. He must have guessed how I loved him. After his questions about Jamie, he must have seen that.

"Tell her... that won't happen."

"She hears you."

"How... straightforward is the connection?"

"She hears what I hear, sees what I see."

"Feels what you feel?"

"Yes."

His nose wrinkled. He touched my face again, softly, a caress. "You don't know how sorry I am."

My skin felt hotter where he had touched it; it was a good heat, but his words burned hotter than his touch. Of course he was sorrier for hurting her. Of course. That shouldn't bother me.

"C'mon, Jared! Let's go!"

We looked up. Kyle was calling to Jared. He seemed utterly at ease, as if he had not been on trial for his life today. Maybe he'd known it would go his way. Maybe he was quick to get over anything. He didn't seem to notice me there beside Jared.

I realized, for the first time, that others had.

Jamie was watching us with a satisfied smile. This probably looked like a good thing to him. Was it?

What do you mean?

What does he see when he looks at us? His family, put back together?

Isn't it? Sort of?

With the one unwelcome addition.

But better than it was yesterday.

I guess...

I know, she admitted. I'm glad Jared knows I'm here... but I still don't like him touching you.

And I like it too much. My face tingled where Jared's fingers had brushed it. Sorry about that.

I don't blame you. Or, at least, I know I shouldn't.

Thanks.

Jamie wasn't the only one watching.

Jeb was curious, that little smile gathering up the corners of his beard.

Sharon and Maggie watched with fire in their eyes. Their expressions were so much the same that the youthful skin and bright hair did nothing to make Sharon look younger than her grizzled mother.

Ian was worried. His eyes were tight, and he seemed on the verge of coming to protect me again. To make sure Jared wasn't upsetting me. I smiled, to reassure him. He didn't smile back, but he took a deep breath.

I don't think that's why he's worried, Mel said.

"Are you listening to her now?" Jared was on his feet but still watching my face.

His question distracted me before I could ask her what she meant. "Yes."

"What's she saying?"

"We're noticing what the others think of your... change of heart." I nodded toward Melanie's aunt and cousin. They turned their backs on me in synchronization.

"Tough nuts," he acknowledged.

"Fine, then," Kyle boomed, turning his body toward the ball that sat under the brightest spot of light. "We'll win it without you."

"I'm coming!" Jared threw one wistful glance at me-at us-and ran to get in on the game.

I wasn't the best scorekeeper. It was too dark to see the ball from where I sat. It was too dark even to see the players well when they weren't right under the lights. I began counting from Jamie's reactions. His shout of victory when his team scored, his groan when the other team did. The groans outnumbered the shouts.

Everyone played. Maggie was the goalie for Andy's team, and Jeb was the goalie for Lily's. They were both surprisingly good. I could see their silhouettes in the light from the goalpost lamps, moving as lithely as if

they were decades younger. Jeb was not afraid to hit the floor to stop a goal, but Maggie was more effective without resorting to such extremes. She was like a magnet for the invisible ball. Every time Ian or Wes got off a shot... thunk! It landed in her hands.

Trudy and Paige quit after a half hour or so and passed me on their way out, chattering with excitement. It seemed impossible that we'd started the morning with a trial, but I was relieved that things had changed so drastically.

The women weren't gone long. They came back with arms full of boxes. Granola bars-the kind with fruit filling. The game came to a halt. Jeb called halftime, and everyone hurried over to eat breakfast.

The goods were divvied up at the center line. It was a mob scene at first.

"Here you go, Wanda," Jamie said, ducking out of the group. He had his hands full of the bars, and water bottles tucked under his arms.

"Thanks. Having fun?"

"Yeah! Wish you could play."

"Next time," I said.

"Here you go..." Ian was there, his hands full of granola bars.

"Beat ya," Jamie told him.

"Oh," Jared said, appearing on Jamie's other side. He also had too many bars for one.

Ian and Jared exchanged a long glance.

"Where's all the food?" Kyle demanded. He stood over an empty box, his head swiveling around the room, looking for the culprit.

"Catch," Jared said, tossing granola bars one by one, hard, like knives.

Kyle plucked them out of the air with ease, then jogged over to see if Jared was holding out on him.

"Here," Ian said, shoving half of his haul toward his brother without looking at him. "Now go."

Kyle ignored him. For the first time today, he looked at me, staring down at me where I sat. His irises were black with the light behind him. I couldn't read his expression.

I recoiled, and caught my breath when my ribs protested.

Jared and Ian closed ranks in front of me like stage curtains.

"You heard him," Jared said.

"Can I say something first?" Kyle asked. He peered down through the space between them.

They didn't respond.

"I'm not sorry," Kyle told me. "I still think it was the right thing to do."

Ian shoved his brother. Kyle reeled back but then stepped forward again.

"Hold on, I'm not done."

"Yeah, you are," Jared said. His hands were clenched, the skin over his knuckles white.

Everyone had noticed now. The room was hushed, all the fun of the game lost.

"No, I'm not." Kyle held his hands up, a gesture of surrender, and spoke to me again. "I don't think I was wrong, but you did save my life. I don't know why, but you did. So I figure, a life for a life. I won't kill you. I'll pay the debt that way."

"You stupid jackass," Ian said.

"Who's got the crush on a worm, bro? You gonna call me stupid?"

Ian lifted his fists, leaning forward.

"I'll tell you why," I said, making my voice louder than I wanted to. But it had the effect I was after. Ian and Jared and Kyle turned to stare at me, fight forgotten for the moment.

It made me nervous. I cleared my throat. "I didn't let you fall because... because I'm not like you. I'm not saying that I'm not... like humans. Because there are others here who would do the same. There are kind and good people here. People like your brother, and Jeb, and Doc... I'm saying that I'm not like you personally."

Kyle stared at me for a minute and then chuckled. "Ouch," he said, still laughing. He turned away from us then, his message given, and walked back to get some water. "Life for a life," he called over his shoulder.

I wasn't sure I believed him. Not sure at all. Humans were good liars.

The Host

CHAPTER 37

Wanted

There was a pattern to the wins. If Jared and Kyle played together, they won. If Jared played with Ian, then that team would win. It seemed to me that Jared could not be defeated, until I saw the brothers play together.

At first it seemed to be a strained thing, for Ian at least, playing as teammates with Kyle. But after a few minutes of running in the dark, they fell into a familiar pattern—a pattern that had existed since long before I'd come to this planet.

Kyle knew what Ian would do before Ian did it, and vice versa. Without having to speak, they told each other everything. Even when Jared pulled all the best players to his side—Brandt, Andy, Wes, Aaron, Lily, and Maggie as goalie—Kyle and Ian were victorious.

“Okay, okay,” Jeb said, catching Aaron's goal attempt with one hand and tucking the ball under his arm. “I think we all know the winners. Now, I hate to be a party pooper, but there's work waiting... and, to be honest, I'm bushed.”

There were a few halfhearted protests and a few moans, but more laughter. No one seemed too upset to have the fun end. From the way a few people sat down right where they were and put their heads between their knees to breathe, it was clear Jeb wasn't the only one who was tired out.

People began to drift out in twos and threes. I scooted to one side of the corridor's mouth, making room for them to pass, probably on their way to the kitchen. It had to be past time for lunch, though it was hard to mark the hour in this black hole. Through the gaps in the line of exiting humans, I watched Kyle and Ian.

When the game was called, Kyle had raised his hand for a high five, but Ian had stalked past him without acknowledging the gesture. Then Kyle caught his brother's shoulder and spun him around. Ian knocked Kyle's hand away. I tensed for a fight—and it seemed like one at first. Kyle threw a punch toward Ian's stomach. Ian dodged it easily, though, and I saw that there was no force behind it. Kyle laughed and used his superior reach to rub his fist into Ian's scalp. Ian smacked that hand away, but this time he halfway smiled.

“Good game, bro,” I heard Kyle say. “You've still got it.”

“You're such an idiot, Kyle,” Ian answered.

“You got the brains; I got the looks. Seems fair.”

Kyle threw another half-strength punch. This time, Ian caught it and twisted his brother into a headlock. Now he was really smiling, and Kyle was cussing and laughing at the same time.

It all looked very violent to me; my eyes narrowed, tight with the stress of watching. But at the same time, it brought to mind one of Melanie's memories: three puppies rolling on the grass, yapping furiously and baring their teeth as if their only desire was to rip out their brothers' throats.

Yes, they're playing, Melanie confirmed. The bonds of brotherhood go deep.

As they should. This is right. If Kyle really doesn't kill us, this will be a good thing.

If, Melanie repeated morosely.

“Hungry?”

I looked up, and my heart stopped beating for a slightly painful moment. It seemed that Jared was still a believer.

I shook my head. This gave me the moment I needed to be able to speak to him. “I'm not sure why, since I've done nothing besides sit here, but I'm just tired.”

He held out his hand.

Get a hold of yourself, Melanie warned me. He's just being courteous.

You think I don't know that?

I tried to keep my hand from shaking as I reached for his.

He pulled me carefully to my feet—to my foot, really. I balanced there on my good leg, not sure how to proceed. He was confused, too. He still held my hand, but there was a wide space between us. I thought of how ridiculous I would look hopping through the caves, and felt my neck get warm. My fingers curled around his, though I wasn't really using him for support.

“Where to?”

“Ah...” I frowned. “I don't really know. I suppose there's still a mat by the ho-in the storage area.”

He frowned back, liking that idea no better than I did.

And then a strong arm was under my arms, supporting my weight.

“I'll get her where she needs to go,” Ian said.

Jared's face was careful, the way he looked at me when he didn't want me to know what he was thinking.

But he was looking at Ian now

But he was looking at Ian now.

"We were just discussing where exactly that would be. She's tired. Maybe the hospital...?"

I shook my head at the same time Ian did. After the past horrible days spent there, I didn't think I could bear the room I'd once misguidedly feared. Especially Walter's empty bed...

"I've got a better place for her," Ian said. "Those cots aren't much softer than rock, and she's got a lot of sore spots."

Jared still held my hand. Did he realize how tightly he was gripping it? The pressure was starting to get uncomfortable, but he didn't seem aware. And I certainly wasn't going to complain.

"Why don't you get lunch?" Jared suggested to Ian. "You look hungry. I'll take her wherever you had planned...?"

Ian chuckled, a low, dark sound. "I'm fine. And honestly, Jared, Wanda needs a bit more help than a hand. I don't know if you're... comfortable enough with the situation to give her that. You see -"

Ian paused to lean down and pull me quickly up into his arms. I gasped as the movement tugged at my side. Jared didn't free my hand. My fingertips were turning red.

"-she's actually had enough exercise for one day, I think. You go on ahead to the kitchen."

They stared at each other while my fingertips turned purple.

"I can carry her," Jared finally said in a low voice.

"Can you?" Ian challenged. He held me out, away from his body.

An offer.

Jared stared at my face for a long minute. Then he sighed and dropped my hand.

Ow, that hurts! Melanie complained. She was referring to the sudden lance of pain that shot through my chest, not the return of blood to my fingers.

Sorry. What do you want me to do about it?

He's not yours.

Yes. I know that.

Ow.

Sorry.

"I think I'll tag along," Jared said as Ian, with a tiny, triumphant smile hovering around the edges of his mouth, turned and headed toward the exit. "There's something I want to discuss with you."

"Suit yourself."

Jared didn't discuss anything at all as we walked through the dark tunnel. He was so quiet, I wasn't sure he was still there. But when we broke out into the light of the cornfield again, he was right beside us.

He didn't speak until we were through the big plaza-until there was no one around but the three of us.

"What's your take on Kyle?" he asked Ian.

Ian snorted. "He prides himself on being a man of his word. Usually, I would trust a promise from him. In this situation... I'm not letting her out of my sight."

"Good."

"It will be fine, Ian," I said. "I'm not afraid."

"You don't have to be. I promise-no one is ever going to do something like this to you again. You will be safe here."

It was hard to look away from his eyes when they blazed like that. Hard to doubt anything he said.

"Yes," Jared agreed. "You will."

He was walking just behind Ian's shoulder. I couldn't see his expression.

"Thanks," I whispered.

No one spoke again until Ian paused at the red and gray doors that leaned over the entrance to his cave.

"Would you mind getting that?" Ian said to Jared, nodding toward the doors.

Jared didn't move. Ian turned around so we could both see him; his face was careful again.

"Your room? This is your better place?" Jared's voice was full of skepticism.

"It's her room now."

I bit my lip. I wanted to tell Ian that of course this wasn't my room, but I didn't get a chance before Jared began questioning him.

"Where's Kyle staying?"

"With Wes, for now."

"And you?"

"I'm not exactly sure."

They stared at each other with appraising eyes.

"Ian, this is -" I started to say.

"Oh," he interrupted, as if just remembering me... as if my weight was so insignificant that he'd forgotten I was here. "You're exhausted, aren't you? Jared, could you get the door, please?"

Wordlessly, Jared wrenched the red door back with a bit too much force and shoved it on top of the gray one.

I now really saw Ian's room for the first time, with the noon sun filtering down through the narrow cracks in the ceiling. It wasn't as bright as Jamie and Jared's room, or as tall. It was smaller, more proportionate. Roundish-sort of like my hole, only ten times the size. There were two twin mattresses on the floor, shoved against opposite walls to make a narrow aisle between them. Against the back wall, there was a long, low wooden cupboard; the left side had a pile of clothes on top, two books, and a stack of playing cards. The right side was completely empty, though there were shapes in the dust that indicated this was a recent occurrence.

Ian set me carefully down on the right mattress, arranging my leg and straightening the pillow under my head. Jared stood in the doorway, facing the passageway.

"That okay?" Ian asked me.

"Yes."

"You look tired."

"I shouldn't be-I've done nothing but sleep lately."

"Your body needs sleep to heal."

I nodded. I couldn't deny that it was hard to hold up my eyelids.

"I'll bring you food later-don't worry about anything."

"Thank you. Ian?"

"Yeah?"

"This is your room," I mumbled. "You'll sleep here, of course."

"You don't mind?"

"Why would I?"

"It's probably a good idea-best way to keep an eye on you. Get some sleep."

"Okay."

My eyes were already closed. He patted my hand, and then I heard him get to his feet. A few seconds later, the wooden door clunked softly against stone.

What do you think you're doing? Melanie demanded.

What? What did I do now?

Wanda, you're... mostly human. You must realize what Ian will think of your invitation.

Invitation? I could see the direction of her thoughts now. It's not like that. This is his room. There are two beds here. There aren't enough sleeping areas for me to have my own space. Of course we should share. Ian knows that.

Does he? Wanda, open your eyes. He's starting to... How do I explain it so that you'll understand right? To feel about you... the way you feel about Jared. Can't you see that?

I couldn't answer for two heartbeats.

That's impossible, I finally said.

"Do you think what happened this morning will influence Aaron or Brandt?" Ian asked in a low voice from the other side of the doors.

"You mean Kyle getting a bye?"

"Yeah. They didn't have to... do anything before. Not when it looked so likely that Kyle would do it for them."

"I see your point. I'll speak to them."

"You think that will be enough?" Ian asked.

"I've saved both their lives. They owe me. If I ask them for something, they'll do it."

"You'd bet her life on that?"

There was a pause.

"We'll keep an eye on her," Jared finally said.

Another long silence.

"Aren't you going to go eat?" Jared asked.

"I think I'll hang out here for a bit... How about you?"

Jared didn't answer.

"What?" Ian asked. "Is there something you want to say to me, Jared?"

"The girl in there..." Jared said slowly.

"Yes?"

"That body doesn't belong to her."

"Your point?"

Jared's voice was hard when he answered. "Keep your hands off it."

A low chuckle from Ian. "Jealous, Howe?"

"That's not really the issue."

"Really." Ian was sarcastic now.

"Wanda seems to be, more or less, cooperating with Melanie. It sounds like they're almost... on friendly terms. But obviously Wanda's making the decisions. What if it were you? How would you feel if you were Melanie? What if you were the one... invaded that way? What if you were trapped, and someone else was telling your body what to do? If you couldn't speak for yourself? Wouldn't you want your wishes-as much as they could be known-respected? At the very least by other humans?"

"Okay, okay. Point taken. I'll keep that in mind."

"What do you mean, you'll keep that in mind?" Jared demanded.

"I mean that I'll think about it."

"There's nothing to think about," Jared retorted. I knew how he would look from the sound of his voice-teeth clenched, jaw strained. "The body and the person locked inside it belong to me."

"You're sure that Melanie still feels the -"

"Melanie will always be mine. And I will always be hers."

Always.

Melanie and I were suddenly at opposite ends of the spectrum. She was flying, elated. I was... not.

We waited anxiously through the next silence.

"But what if it were you?" Ian asked in little more than a whisper. "What if you were stuffed in a human body and let loose on this planet, only to find yourself lost among your own kind? What if you were such a good... person that you tried to save the life you'd taken, that you almost died trying to get her back to her family? What if you then found yourself surrounded by violent aliens who hated you and hurt you and tried to murder you, over and over again?" His voice faltered momentarily. "What if you just kept doing whatever you could to save and heal these people despite that? Wouldn't you deserve a life, too? Wouldn't you have earned that much?"

Jared didn't answer. I felt my eyes getting moist. Did Ian really think so highly of me? Did he really think I'd earned the right to a life here?

"Point taken?" Ian pressed.

"I-I'll have to think about that one."

"Do that."

"But still -"

Ian interrupted him with a sigh. "Don't get worked up. Wanda isn't exactly human, despite the body. She doesn't seem to respond to... physical contact the same way a human would."

Now Jared laughed. "Is that your theory?"

"What's funny?"

"She is quite capable of responding to physical contact," Jared informed him, his tone suddenly sober again. "She's human enough for that. Or her body is, anyway."

My face went hot.

Ian was silent.

"Jealous, O'Shea?"

"Actually... I am. Surprisingly so." Ian's voice was strained. "How would you know that?"

Now Jared hesitated. "It was... sort of an experiment."

"An experiment?"

"It didn't go the way I thought it would. Mel punched me." I could hear that he was grinning at the memory, and I could see, in my head, the little lines fanning out around his eyes.

"Melanie... punched... you?"

"It sure wasn't Wanda. You should have seen her face.... What? Hey, Ian, easy, man!"

“Did you think for one moment what that must have done to her?” Ian hissed.

“Mel?”

“No, you fool, Wanda!”

“Done to Wanda?” Jared asked, sounding bewildered by the idea.

“Oh, get out of here. Go eat something. Stay away from me for a few hours.”

Ian didn’t give him a chance to answer. He yanked the door out of his way—roughly but very quietly—and then slid into his room and put the door back in its place.

He turned and met my gaze. From his expression, he was surprised to find me awake. Surprised and chagrined. The fire in his eyes blazed and then slowly dimmed. He pursed his lips.

He cocked his head to one side, listening. I listened, too, but Jared’s retreat made no sound. Ian waited for another moment, then sighed and plunked down on the edge of his mattress, across from me.

“I guess we weren’t as quiet as I thought,” he said.

“Sound carries in these caves,” I whispered.

He nodded. “So…” he finally said. “What do you think?”

The Host

CHAPTER 38

Touched

What do I think about what?”

“About our… discussion out there,” Ian clarified.

What did I think about it? I didn’t know.

Somehow, Ian was able to look at things from my perspective, my alien perspective. He thought I had earned a right to my life.

But he was… jealous? Of Jared?

He knew what I was. He knew I was just a tiny creature fused into the back of Melanie’s brain. A worm, as Kyle had said. Yet even Kyle thought Ian had a “crush” on me. On me? That wasn’t possible.

Or did he want to know what I thought about Jared? My feelings on the experiment? More details about my responses to physical contact? I shuddered.

Or my thoughts on Melanie? Melanie’s thoughts on their conversation? Whether I agreed with Jared about her rights?

I didn’t know what I thought. About any of it.

“I really don’t know,” I said.

He nodded. “That’s understandable.”

“Only because you are very understanding.”

He smiled at me. It was odd how his eyes could both scorch and warm. Especially with a color that was closer to ice than fire. They were quite warm at the moment.

“I like you very much, Wanda.”

“I’m only just beginning to see that. I guess I’m a little slow.”

“It’s a surprise to me, too.”

We both thought that over.

He pursed his lips. “And… I suppose… that is one of the things you don’t know how you feel about?”

“No. I mean yes, I… don’t know. I… I -“

“That’s okay. You haven’t had long to think about it. And it must seem… strange.”

I nodded. “Yes. More than strange. Impossible.”

“Tell me something,” Ian said after a moment.

“If I know the answer.”

“It’s not a hard question.”

He didn’t ask it right away. Instead, he reached across the narrow space and picked up my hand. He held it in both of his for a moment, and then he trailed the fingers of his left hand slowly up my arm, from my wrist to my shoulder. Just as slowly, he pulled them back again. He looked at the skin of my arm rather than my face, watching the goose bumps that formed along the path of his fingers.

“Does that feel good or bad to you?” he asked.

Does that feel good or bad to you? he asked.

Bad, Melanie insisted.

But it doesn't hurt, I protested.

That's not what he's asking. When he says good... Oh, it's like talking to a child!

I'm not even a year old, you know. Or am I now? I was sidetracked, trying to figure out the date.

Melanie was not distracted. Good, to him, means the way it feels when Jared touches us. The memory she provided was not one from the caves. It was in the magic canyon, at sunset. Jared stood behind her and let his hands follow the shape of her arms, from her shoulders to her wrists. I shivered at the pleasure of the simple touch. Like that.

Oh.

"Wanda?"

"Melanie says bad," I whispered.

"What do you say?"

"I say... I don't know."

When I could meet his eyes, they were warmer than I expected. "I can't even imagine how confusing this all must be to you."

It was comforting that he understood. "Yes. I'm confused."

His hand traced up and down my arm again. "Would you like me to stop?"

I hesitated. "Yes," I decided. "That... what you're doing... makes it hard for me to think. And Melanie is... angry at me. That also makes it hard to think."

I'm not angry at you. Tell him to leave.

Ian is my friend. I don't want him to leave.

He leaned away, folding his arms across his chest.

"I don't suppose she'd give us a minute alone?"

I laughed. "I doubt it."

Ian tilted his head to one side, his expression speculative.

"Melanie Stryder?" he asked, addressing her.

We both started at the name.

Ian went on. "I'd like the chance to speak with Wanda privately, if you don't mind. Is there any way that could be arranged?"

Of all the nerve! You tell him I said no chance in hell! I do not like this man.

My nose wrinkled up.

"What did she say?"

"She said no." I tried to say the words as gently as they could be said. "And that she doesn't... like you."

Ian laughed. "I can respect that. I can respect her. Well, it was worth a try." He sighed. "Kind of puts a damper on things, having an audience."

What things? Mel growled.

I grimaced. I didn't like feeling her anger. It was so much more vicious than mine.

Get used to it.

Ian put his hand on my face. "I'll let you think about things, okay? So you can decide how you feel."

I tried to be objective about that hand. It was soft against my face. It felt... nice. Not like when Jared touched me. But also different from the way it felt when Jamie hugged me. Other.

"It might take a while. None of this makes any sense, you know," I told him.

He grinned. "I know."

I realized, when he smiled then, that I wanted him to like me. The rest-the hand on my face, the fingers on my arm-I still wasn't sure at all about those. But I wanted him to like me, and to think kind things about me. Which is why it was hard to tell him the truth.

"You don't really feel that way about me, you know," I whispered. "It's this body.... She's pretty, isn't she?"

He nodded. "She is. Melanie is a very pretty girl. Even beautiful." His hand moved to touch my bad cheek, to stroke the rough, scarring skin with gentle fingers. "In spite of what I've done to her face."

Normally, I would have denied that automatically. Reminded him that the wounds on my face weren't his fault. But I was so confused that my head was spinning and I couldn't form a coherent sentence.

Why should it bother me that he thought Melanie was beautiful?

You've got me there. My feelings were no clearer to her than they were to me.

He brushed my hair back from my forehead.

“But, pretty as she is, she’s a stranger to me. She’s not the one I… care about.”

That made me feel better. Which was even more confusing.

“Ian, you don’t… Nobody here separates us the way they should. Not you, not Jamie, not Jeb.” The truth came out in a rush, more heated than I’d meant it to be. “You couldn’t care about me. If you could hold me in your hand, me, you would be disgusted. You would throw me to the ground and grind me under your foot.”

His pale forehead creased as his black brows pulled together. “I… not if I knew it was you.”

I laughed without humor. “How would you know? You couldn’t tell us apart.”

His mouth turned down.

“It’s just the body,” I repeated.

“That’s not true at all,” he disagreed. “It’s not the face, but the expressions on it. It’s not the voice, but what you say. It’s not how you look in that body, but the things you do with it. You are beautiful.”

He moved forward as he spoke, kneeling beside the bed where I lay and taking my hand again in both of his.

“I’ve never known anyone like you.”

I sighed. “Ian, what if I’d come here in Magnolia’s body?”

He grimaced and then laughed. “Okay. That’s a good question. I don’t know.”

“Or Wes’s?”

“But you’re female-you yourself are.”

“And I always request whatever a planet’s equivalent is. It seems more… right. But I could be put into a man and I would function just fine.”

“But you’re not in a man’s body.”

“See? That’s my point. Body and soul. Two different things, in my case.”

“I wouldn’t want it without you.”

“You wouldn’t want me without it.”

He touched my cheek again and left his hand there, his thumb under my jaw. “But this body is part of you, too. It’s part of who you are. And, unless you change your mind and turn us all in, it’s who you will always be.”

Ah, the finality of it. Yes, I would die in this body. The final death.

And I will never live in it again, Melanie whispered.

It’s not how either of us planned our future, is it?

No. Neither of us planned to have no future.

“Another internal conversation?” Ian guessed.

“We’re thinking of our mortality.”

“You could live forever if you left us.”

“Yes, I could.” I sighed. “You know, humans have the shortest life span of any species I’ve ever been, except the Spiders. You have so little time.”

“Don’t you think, then…” Ian paused and leaned closer to me so that I couldn’t seem to see anything around his face, just snow and sapphire and ink. “That maybe you should make the most of what time you have? That you should live while you’re alive?”

I didn’t see it coming the way I had with Jared. Ian was not as familiar to me. Melanie realized what he was going to do before I did, just a second before his lips touched mine.

No!

It wasn’t like kissing Jared. With Jared, there was no thought, only desire. No control. A spark to gasoline-inevitable. With Ian, I didn’t even know what I felt. Everything was muddled and confused.

His lips were soft and warm. He pressed them only lightly to mine, and then brushed them back and forth across my mouth.

“Good or bad?” he whispered against my lips.

Bad! Bad, bad!

“I-I can’t think.” When I moved my mouth to speak, he moved his with it.

“That sounds… good.”

His mouth pressed down with more force now. He caught my lower lip between his and pulled on it gently.

Melanie wanted to hit him-so much more than she’d wanted to punch Jared. She wanted to shove him away and then kick his face. The image was horrible. It conflicted jarringly with the sensation of Ian’s kiss.

"Please," I whispered.

"Yes?"

"Please stop. I can't think. Please."

He sat back at once, clasping his hands in front of him. "Okay," he said, his tone cautious.

I pressed my hands against my face, wishing I could push out Melanie's anger.

"Well, at least nobody punched me." Ian grinned.

"She wanted to do more than that. Ugh. I don't like it when she's mad. It hurts my head. Anger is so... ugly."

"Why didn't she?"

"Because I didn't lose control. She only breaks free when I'm... overwhelmed."

He watched as I kneaded my forehead.

Calm down, I begged her. He's not touching me.

Has he forgotten that I'm here? Doesn't he care? This is me, it's me!

I tried to explain that.

What about you? Have you forgotten Jared?

She threw the memories at me the way she'd done in the beginning, only this time they were like blows. A thousand punches of his smile, his eyes, his lips on mine, his hands on my skin...

Of course not. Have you forgotten that you don't want me to love him?

"She's talking to you."

"Yelling at me," I corrected.

"I can tell now. I can see you concentrate on the conversation. I never noticed before today."

"She's not always this vocal."

"I am sorry, Melanie," he said. "I know this must be impossible for you."

Again, she visualized smashing her foot into his sculpted nose, leaving it crooked like Kyle's. Tell him I don't want his apologies.

I winced.

Ian half smiled, half grimaced. "She doesn't accept."

I shook my head.

"So she can break free? If you're overwhelmed?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes, if she takes me by surprise and I'm too... emotional. Emotion makes it hard to concentrate. But it's been more difficult for her lately. It's like the door between us is locked. I don't know why. I tried to let her out when Kyle -" I stopped talking abruptly, grinding my teeth together.

"When Kyle tried to kill you," he finished matter-of-factly. "You wanted her free? Why?"

I just stared at him.

"To fight him?" he guessed.

I didn't answer.

He sighed. "Okay. Don't tell me. Why do you think the... door is locked?"

I frowned. "I don't know. Maybe the time passing... It worries us."

"But she broke through before, to punch Jared."

"Yes." I shuddered at the memory of my fist striking his jaw.

"Because you were overwhelmed and emotional?"

"Yes."

"What did he do? Just kiss you?"

I nodded.

Ian flinched. His eyes tightened.

"What?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

"When Jared kisses you, you are... overwhelmed by emotion."

I stared at him, worried by the expression on his face. Melanie enjoyed it. That's right!

He sighed. "And when I kiss you... you aren't sure if you like it. You are not... overwhelmed."

"Oh." Ian was jealous. How very strange this world was. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I told you I'd give you time, and I don't mind waiting for you to think things through. I don't mind that at all."

"What do you mind?" Because he minded something very much.

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I saw how you loved Jamie. That was always really

obvious. I guess I should have seen that you loved Jared, too. Maybe I didn't want to. It makes sense. You came here for the two of them. You love them both, the same way Melanie did. Jamie like a brother. And Jared..."

He was looking away, staring at the wall over me. I had to look away, too. I stared at the sunlight where it touched the red door.

"How much of that is Melanie?" he wanted to know.

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

I could barely hear his answer. "Yes. It does to me." Without looking at me or seeming to notice what he was doing, Ian took my hand again.

It was very quiet for a minute. Even Melanie was still. That was nice.

Then, as though a switch had been flipped, Ian was his normal self again. He laughed.

"Time is on my side," he said, grinning. "We've got the rest of our lives in here. One day you'll wonder what you ever saw in Jared."

In your dreams.

I laughed with him, happy he was joking again.

"Wanda? Wanda, can I come in?"

Jamie's voice started from down the hall and, accompanied by the sound of his jogging steps, ended right outside the door.

"Of course, Jamie."

I already had my hand held out to him before he shrugged the door aside. I hadn't seen him nearly enough lately. Unconscious or crippled, I hadn't been free to seek him out.

"Hey, Wanda! Hey, Ian!" Jamie was all grins, his messy hair bouncing when he moved. He headed for my reaching hand, but Ian was in his way. So he settled for sitting on the edge of my mattress and resting his hand on my foot. "How are you feeling?"

"Better."

"Hungry yet? There's beef jerky and corn on the cob! I could get you some."

"I'm okay for now. How are you? I haven't seen you much lately."

Jamie made a face. "Sharon gave me detention."

I smiled. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. I was totally framed." His innocent expression was a bit overdone, and he quickly changed the subject. "Guess what? Jared was saying at lunch that he didn't think it was fair for you to have to move out of the room you were used to. He said we weren't being good hosts. He said you should move back in with me! Isn't that great? I asked him if I could tell you right away, and he said that was a good idea. He said you would be in here."

"I'll bet he did," Ian murmured.

"So what do you think, Wanda? We get to be roomies again!"

"But Jamie, where will Jared stay?"

"Wait-let me guess," Ian interrupted. "I bet he said the room was big enough for three. Am I right?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

"So that's good, isn't it, Wanda? It will be just like before we came here!"

It felt sort of like a razor sliding between my ribs when he said that-too clean and precise a pain to be compared to a blow or a break.

Jamie analyzed my tortured expression with alarm. "Oh. No, I mean but with you, too. It will be nice. The four of us, right?"

I tried to laugh through the pain; it didn't hurt any worse than not laughing.

Ian squeezed my hand.

"The four of us," I mumbled. "Nice."

Jamie crawled up the mattress, worming his way around Ian, to put his arms around my neck.

"Sorry. Don't be sad."

"Don't worry about it."

"You know I love you, too."

So sharp, so piercing, the emotions of this planet. Jamie had never said those words to me before. My whole body suddenly felt a few degrees warmer.

So sharp, Melanie agreed, wincing at her own pain.

"Will you come back?" Jamie begged against my shoulder.

I couldn't answer right away.

"What does Mel want?" he asked.

"She wants to live with you," I whispered. I didn't have to check to know that.

"And what do you want?"

"Do you want me to live with you?"

"You know I do, Wanda. Please."

I hesitated.

"Please?"

"If that's what you want, Jamie. Okay."

"Woo hoo!" Jamie crowed in my ear. "Cool! I'm gonna go tell Jared! I'll get you some food, too, okay?"

He was already on his feet, bouncing the mattress so that I felt it in my ribs.

"Okay."

"You want something, Ian?"

"Sure, kid. I want you to tell Jared he's shameless."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Go get Wanda some lunch."

"Sure. And I'll ask Wes for his extra bed. Kyle can come back in here, and everything will be like it should be!"

"Perfect," Ian said, and though I didn't look at his face, I knew he was rolling his eyes.

"Perfect," I whispered, and felt the razor's edge again.

The Host

CHAPTER 39

Worried

Perfect, I grumbled to myself. Just perfect.

Ian was coming to join me for lunch, a big smile glued into place on his face. Trying to cheer me up... again.

I think you're overdoing the sarcasm lately, Melanie told me.

I'll keep that in mind.

I hadn't heard from her much in the past week. Neither of us was good company right now. It was better if we avoided social interaction, even with each other.

"Hey, Wanda," Ian greeted me, hopping up onto the counter beside me. He had a bowl of tomato soup in one hand, still steaming. Mine was beside me, cooled and half full. I was toying with a piece of roll, ripping it into tiny pieces.

I didn't answer him.

"Oh, come on." He put his hand on my knee. Mel's angry reaction was lethargic. She was too used to this kind of thing to really work up a good fit anymore. "They'll be back today. Before sunset, without a doubt."

"You said that three days ago, and two days ago, and again yesterday," I reminded him.

"I have a good feeling about today. Don't sulk-it's so human," he teased.

"I'm not sulking." I wasn't. I was so worried I could barely think straight. It didn't leave me energy to do anything else.

"This isn't the first raid Jamie's gone on."

"That makes me feel so much better." Again with the sarcasm. Melanie was right-I really was overusing it.

"He's got Jared and Geoffrey and Trudy with him. And Kyle's here." Ian laughed. "So there's no way they'll get into any trouble."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay."

He turned his attention to his food and let me stew. Ian was nice that way-always trying to give me what I wanted, even when what I wanted was unclear to either of us. His insistent attempts to distract me from the present anxiety excepted, of course. I knew I didn't want that. I wanted to worry; it was the only thing I could do.

uu.

It had been a month since I'd moved back into Jamie and Jared's room. For three weeks of that time, the four of us had lived together. Jared slept on a mattress wedged above the head of the bed where Jamie and I slept.

I'd gotten used to it-the sleeping part, at least; I was having a hard time sleeping now in the empty room. I missed the sound of two other bodies breathing.

I hadn't gotten used to waking up every morning with Jared there. It still took me a second too long to return his morning greeting. He was not at ease, either, but he was always polite. We were both very polite.

It was almost scripted at this point.

"Good morning, Wanda, how did you sleep?"

"Fine, thank you, and you?"

"Fine, thanks. And... Mel?"

"She's good, too, thanks."

Jamie's constant state of euphoria and his happy chattering kept things from becoming too strained. He talked about-and to-Melanie often, until her name was no longer the source of stress it had once been when Jared was present. Every day, it got a little bit more comfortable, the pattern of my life here a little bit more pleasant.

We were... sort of happy. Both Melanie and I.

And then, a week ago, Jared had left for another short raid-mostly to replace broken tools-and taken Jamie with him.

"You tired?" Ian asked.

I realized I was rubbing at my eyes. "Not really."

"Still not sleeping well?"

"It's too quiet."

"I could sleep with you-Oh, calm down, Melanie. You know what I meant."

Ian always noticed when Melanie's antagonism made me cringe.

"I thought they were going to be back today," I challenged.

"You're right. I guess there's no need for rearranging."

I sighed.

"Maybe you should take the afternoon off."

"Don't be silly," I told him. "I've got plenty of energy for work."

He grinned as though I'd said something that pleased him. Something he'd been hoping I would say.

"Good. I could use some help with a project."

"What's the project?"

"I'll show you-you finished there?"

I nodded.

He took my hand as he led me out of the kitchen. Again, this was so common that Melanie barely protested.

"Why are we going this way?" The eastern field did not need attention. We'd been part of the group that had irrigated it this morning.

Ian didn't answer. He was still grinning.

He led me down the eastern tunnel, past the field and into the corridor that led to only one place. As soon as we were in the tunnel, I could hear voices echoing and a sporadic thud, thud that it took me a moment to place. The stale, bitter sulfur odor helped link the sound to the memory.

"Ian, I'm not in the mood."

"You said you had plenty of energy."

"To work. Not to play soccer."

"But Lily and Wes will be really disappointed. I promised them a game of two-on-two. They worked so hard this morning to free up the afternoon..."

"Don't try to make me feel guilty," I said as we rounded the last curve. I could see the blue light of several lamps, shadows flitting in front of them.

"Isn't it working?" he teased. "C'mon, Wanda. It will be good for you."

He pulled me into the low-ceilinged game room, where Lily and Wes were passing the ball back and forth across the length of the field.

"Hev Wanda Hev Ian" I,ilv called to us

“This one’s mine, O’Shea,” Wes warned him.

“You’re not going to let me lose to Wes, are you?” Ian murmured.

“You could beat them alone.”

“It would still be a forfeit. I’d never live it down.”

I sighed. “Fine. Fine. Be that way.”

Ian hugged me with what Melanie thought was unnecessary enthusiasm. “You’re my very favorite person in the known universe.”

“Thanks,” I muttered dryly.

“Ready to be humiliated, Wanda?” Wes taunted. “You may have taken the planet, but you’re losing this game.”

Ian laughed, but I didn’t respond. The joke made me uneasy. How could Wes make a joke about that? Humans were always surprising me.

Melanie included. She’d been in just as miserable a mood as I was, but now she was suddenly excited.

We didn’t get to play last time, she explained. I could feel her yearning to run-to run for pleasure rather than in fear. Running was something she used to love. Doing nothing won’t get them home any faster. A distraction might be nice. She was already thinking strategy, sizing up our opponents.

“Do you know the rules?” Lily asked me.

I nodded. “I remember them.”

Absently, I bent my leg at the knee and grabbed my ankle behind me, pulling it to stretch out the muscles. It was a familiar position to my body. I stretched the other leg and was pleased that it felt whole. The bruise on the back of my thigh was faded yellow, almost gone. My side felt fine, which made me think that my rib had never really been broken.

I’d seen my face while I was cleaning mirrors two weeks ago. The scar forming on my cheek was dark red and as big as the palm of my hand, with a dozen jagged points around the edges. It bothered Melanie more than it did me.

“I’ll take the goal,” Ian told me, while Lily fell back and Wes paced beside the ball. A mismatch. Melanie liked this. Competition appealed to her.

From the moment the game started-Wes kicking the ball back to Lily and then sprinting ahead to get around me for her pass-there was very little time to think. Only to react and to feel. See Lily shift her body, measure the direction this would send the ball. Cut Wes off-ah, but he was surprised by how fast I was-launch the ball to Ian and move up the field. Lily was playing too far forward. I raced her to the lantern goalpost and won. Ian aimed the pass perfectly, and I scored the first goal.

It felt good: the stretch and pull of muscle, the sweat of exertion rather than plain heat, the teamwork with Ian. We were well matched. I was quick, and his aim was deadly. Wes’s goading dried up before Ian scored the third goal.

Lily called the game when we hit twenty-one. She was breathing hard. Not me; I felt good, muscles warm and limber.

Wes wanted another round, but Lily was done.

“Face it, they’re better.”

“We got hustled.”

“No one ever said she couldn’t play.”

“No one ever said she was a pro, either.”

I liked that-it made me smile.

“Don’t be a sore loser,” Lily said, reaching out to tickle Wes’s stomach playfully. He caught her fingers and pulled her closer to him. She laughed, tugging away, but Wes reeled her in and planted a solid kiss on her laughing mouth.

Ian and I exchanged a quick, startled glance.

“For you, I will lose with grace,” Wes told her, and then set her free.

Lily’s smooth caramel skin had taken on a bit of pink on her cheeks and neck. She peeked at Ian and me to see our reaction.

“And now,” Wes continued, “I’m off to get reinforcements. We’ll see how your little ringer does against Kyle, Ian.” He lobbed the ball into the far dark corner of the cave, where I heard it splash into the spring.

Ian trotted off to retrieve it, while I continued to look at Lily curiously.

She laughed at my expression, sounding self-conscious, which was unusual for her. “I know, I know.”

“How long has... that been going on?” I wondered.

She grimaced.

“Not my business. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s not a secret-how could anything be a secret here, anyway? It’s just really... new to me. It’s sort of your fault,” she added, smiling to show that she was teasing me.

I felt a little guilty anyway. And confused. “What did I do?”

“Nothing,” she assured me. “It was Wes’s... reaction to you that surprised me. I didn’t know he had so much depth to him. I was never really aware of him before that. Oh, well. He’s too young for me, but what does that matter here?” She laughed again. “It’s strange how life and love go on. I didn’t expect that.”

“Yeah. Kind of funny how that happens,” Ian agreed. I hadn’t heard him return. He slung his arm around my shoulders. “It’s nice, though. You do know Wes has been infatuated with you since he first got here, right?”

“So he says. I hadn’t noticed.”

Ian laughed. “Then you’re the only one. So, Wanda, how about some one-on-one while we’re waiting?”

I could feel Melanie’s wordless enthusiasm. “Okay.”

He let me have the ball first, holding back, hugging the goal area. My first shot cut between him and the post, scoring. I rushed him when he kicked off, and got the ball back. I scored again.

He’s letting us win, Mel grumbled.

“Come on, Ian. Play.”

“I am.”

Tell him he’s playing like a girl.

“Playing like a girl.”

He laughed, and I slipped the ball away from him again. The taunt wasn’t enough. I had an inspiration then, and I shot the ball through his goal, guessing it would probably be the last time I got to do it.

Mel objected. I don’t like this idea.

I’ll bet it works, though.

I put the ball back at center field. “You win, and you can sleep in my room while they’re gone.” I needed a good night’s rest.

“First to ten.” With a grunt, he launched the ball past me so hard that it rebounded off the distant, invisible wall behind my goal and came back to us.

I looked at Lily. “Was that wide?”

“No, it looked dead center to me.”

“One-three,” Ian announced.

It took him fifteen minutes to win, but at least I got to really work. I even squeezed in one more goal, of which I was proud. I was gasping for air when he stole the ball from me and sailed it through my goalposts for the last time.

He wasn’t winded. “Ten-four, I win.”

“Good game,” I huffed.

“Tired?” he asked, the innocence in his tone a bit overdone. Being funny. He stretched. “I think I’m ready for bed myself.” He leered in a melodramatic way.

I winced.

“Aw, Mel, you know I’m joking. Be nice.”

Lily eyed us, mystified.

“Jared’s Melanie objects to me,” Ian told her, winking.

Her eyebrows rose. “That’s... interesting.”

“I wonder what’s taking Wes so long?” Ian muttered, not taking much notice of her reaction. “Should we go find out? I could use some water.”

“Me, too,” I agreed.

“Bring some back.” Lily didn’t move from where she was half sprawled on the floor.

As we entered the narrow tunnel, Ian threw one arm lightly around my waist.

“You know,” he said, “it’s really unfair for Melanie to make you suffer when she’s angry at me.”

“Since when are humans fair?”

“Good point.”

“Besides, she’d be glad to make you suffer, if I’d let her.”

He laughed.

“That’s nice about Wes and Lily, don’t you think?” he said.

“Yes. They both seem very happy. I like that.”

“I like it, too. Wes finally got the girl. Gives me hope.” He winked at me. “Do you think Melanie would make you very uncomfortable if I were to kiss you right now?”

I stiffened for a second, then took a deep breath. “Probably.”

Oh, yes.

“Definitely.”

Ian sighed.

We heard Wes shouting at the same time. His voice came from the end of the tunnel, getting closer with each word.

“They’re back! Wanda, they’re back!”

It took me less than a second to process, and then I was sprinting. Behind me, Ian mumbled something about wasted effort.

I nearly knocked Wes down. “Where?” I gasped.

“In the plaza.”

And I was off again. I flew into the big garden room with my eyes already searching. It wasn’t hard to find them. Jamie was standing at the front of a group of people near the entrance to the southern tunnel.

“Hey, Wanda!” he yelled, waving.

Trudy held his arm as I ran around the edges of the field, as if she were holding him back from running to meet me.

I grabbed his shoulders with both hands and pulled him to me. “Oh, Jamie!”

“Did ya miss me?”

“Just a tiny bit. Where is everyone? Is everyone home? Is everyone okay?” Besides Jamie, Trudy was the only person here who was back from the raid. Everyone else in the little crowd—Lucina, Ruth Ann, Kyle, Travis, Violetta, Reid—was welcoming them home.

“Everyone’s back and well,” Trudy assured me.

My eyes swept the big cave. “Where are they?”

“Uh... getting cleaned up, unloading...”

I wanted to offer my help—anything that would get me to where Jared was so I could see with my own eyes that he was safe—but I knew I wouldn’t be allowed to see where the goods were coming in.

“You look like you need a bath,” I told Jamie, rumpling his dirty, knotted hair without letting go of him.

“He’s supposed to go lie down,” Trudy said.

“Trudy,” Jamie muttered, giving her a dark look.

Trudy glanced at me quickly, then looked away.

“Lie down... ?” I stared at Jamie, pulling back to get a good look at him. He didn’t seem tired—his eyes were bright, and his cheeks flushed under his tan. My eyes raked over him once and then froze on his right leg.

There was a ragged hole in his jeans a few inches above his knee. The fabric around the hole was a dark reddish brown, and the ominous color spread in a long stain all the way to the cuff.

Blood, Melanie realized with horror.

“Jamie! What happened?”

“Thanks, Trudy.”

“She was going to notice soon enough. C’mon, we’ll talk while you limp.”

Trudy put her arm under his and helped him hop forward one slow step at a time, keeping his weight on his left leg.

“Jamie, tell me what happened!” I put my arm around him from the other side, trying to carry as much of his weight as I could.

“It’s really stupid. And totally my fault. And it could have happened here.”

“Tell me.”

He sighed. “I tripped with a knife in my hand.”

I shuddered. “Shouldn’t we be taking you the other way? You need to see Doc.”

“That’s where I’m coming from. That’s where we went first.”

“What did Doc say?”

“It’s fine. He cleaned it and bandaged it and said to go lie down.”

“And have you walk all this way? Why didn’t you stay in the hospital?”

Jamie made a face and glanced up at Trudy, like he was looking for an answer.

"Jamie will be more comfortable on his bed," she suggested.

"Yeah," he agreed quickly. "Who wants to lie around on one of those awful cots?"

I looked at them and then behind me. The crowd was gone. I could hear their voices echoing back down the southern corridor.

What was that about? Mel wondered warily.

It occurred to me that Trudy wasn't a much better liar than I was. When she'd said the others from the raid were unloading and cleaning up, there was a false note to her voice. I thought I remembered her eyes flickering to the right, back toward that tunnel.

"Hey, kid! Hey, Trudy!" Ian had caught up to us.

"Hi, Ian," they greeted him at the same time.

"What happened here?"

"Fell on a knife," Jamie grunted, ducking his head.

Ian laughed.

"I don't think it's funny," I told him, my voice tight. Melanie, frantic with worry in my head, imagined slapping him. I ignored her.

"Could happen to anybody," Ian said, planting a light punch on Jamie's arm.

"Right," Jamie muttered.

"Where's everybody?"

I watched Trudy from the corner of my eye as she answered him.

"They, uh, had some unloading to finish up." This time her eyes moved toward the southern tunnel very deliberately, and Ian's expression hardened, turned enraged for half a second. Then Trudy glanced back at me and caught me watching.

Distract them, Melanie whispered.

I looked down at Jamie quickly.

"Are you hungry?" I asked him.

"Yeah."

"When aren't you hungry?" Ian teased. His face was relaxed again. He was better at deception than Trudy. When we reached our room, Jamie sank gratefully onto the big mattress.

"You sure you're okay?" I checked.

"It's nothing. Really. Doc says I'll be fine in a few days."

I nodded, though I was not convinced.

"I'm going to go clean up," Trudy murmured as she left.

Ian propped himself against the wall, going nowhere.

Keep your face down when you lie, Melanie suggested.

"Ian?" I stared intently at Jamie's bloody leg. "Do you mind getting us some food? I'm hungry, too."

"Yeah. Get us something good."

I could feel Ian's eyes on me, but I didn't look up.

"Okay," he agreed. "I'll be back in just a second." He emphasized the short time.

I kept my gaze down, as if I were examining the wound, until I heard his footsteps fade.

"You aren't mad at me?" Jamie asked.

"Of course not."

"I know you didn't want me to go."

"You're safe now; that's all that matters." I patted his arm absentmindedly. Then I got to my feet and let my hair, now chin length, fall forward to hide my face.

"I'll be right back-I forgot something I wanted to tell Ian."

"What?" he asked, confused by my tone.

"You'll be okay here by yourself?"

"Course I will," he retorted, sidetracked.

I ducked out around the screen before he could ask anything else.

The hall was clear, Ian out of sight. I had to hurry. I knew he was already suspicious. He'd noticed that I'd noticed Trudy's awkward and artificial explanation. He wouldn't be gone long.

I walked quickly, but didn't run, as I moved through the big plaza. Purposeful, as if I were on an errand. There were only a few people there-Reid, headed for the passageway that led to the bathing pool; Ruth Ann and Heidi, paused by the eastern corridor, chatting; Iily and Wes, their backs to me, holding hands. No one paid me

front, paused by the eastern corridor, chatting, Lily and Wes, their backs to me, holding hands. No one paid me any attention. I stared ahead as if I were not focused on the southern tunnel, only turning in at the very last second.

As soon as I was in the pitch-black of the corridor, I sped up, jogging along the familiar path.

Some instinct told me this was the same thing—that this was a repeat of the last time Jared and the others had come home from a raid, and everyone was sad, and Doc had gotten drunk, and no one would answer my questions. It was happening again, whatever I wasn't supposed to know about. What I didn't want to know about, according to Ian. I felt prickles on the back of my neck. Maybe I didn't want to know.

Yes, you do. We both do.

I'm frightened.

Me, too.

I ran as quietly as I could down the dark tunnel.

The Host

CHAPTER 40

Horrified

I slowed when I heard the sound of voices. I was not close enough to the hospital for it to be Doc. Others were on their way back. I pressed myself against the rock wall and crept forward as quietly as I could. My breathing was ragged from running. I covered my mouth with my hand to stifle the sound.

“. . . why we keep doing this,” someone complained.

I wasn't sure whose voice it was. Someone I didn't know well. Maybe Violetta? It held that same depressed tone that I recognized from before. It erased any notion that I'd been imagining things.

“Doc didn't want to. It was Jared's idea this time.”

I was sure that it was Geoffrey who spoke now, though his voice was a little changed by the subdued revulsion in it. Geoffrey had been with Trudy on the raid, of course. They did everything together.

“I thought he was the biggest opponent to this business.”

That was Travis, I guessed.

“He's more... motivated now,” Geoffrey answered. His voice was quiet, but I could tell he was angry about something.

They passed just half a foot from where I cringed into the rocks. I froze, holding my breath.

“I think it's sick,” Violetta muttered. “Disgusting. It's never going to work.”

They walked slowly, their steps weighted with despair.

No one answered her. No one spoke again in my hearing. I stayed motionless until their footsteps had faded a little, but I couldn't wait until the sound disappeared completely. Ian might be following me already.

I crept forward as quickly as I could and then started jogging again when I decided it was safe.

I saw the first faint hints of daylight streaming around the curving tunnel ahead, and I shifted into a quieter lope that still kept me moving swiftly. I knew that once I was around the gradual arc, I would be able to see the doorway into Doc's realm. I followed the bend, and the light grew brighter.

I moved cautiously now, putting each foot down with silent care. It was very quiet. For a moment, I wondered if I was wrong and there was no one here at all. Then, as the uneven entrance came into view, throwing a block of white sunlight against the opposite wall, I could hear the sound of quiet sobbing.

I tiptoed right to the edge of the gap and paused, listening.

The sobbing continued. Another sound, a soft, rhythmic thudding, kept time with it.

“There, there.” It was Jeb's voice, thick with some emotion. “S okay. S okay, Doc. Don't take it so hard.”

Hushed footsteps, more than one set, were moving around the room. Fabric rustling. A brushing sound. It reminded me of the sounds of cleaning.

There was a smell that didn't belong here. Strange... not quite metallic, but not quite anything else, either. The smell was not familiar—I was sure I had never smelled it before—and yet I had an odd feeling that it should be familiar to me.

I was afraid to move around the corner.

What's the worst they will do to us? Mel pointed out. Make us leave?

You're right.

Things had definitely changed if that was the worst I could fear from the humans now.

I took a deep breath-noticing again that strange, wrong smell-and eased around the rocky edge into the hospital.

No one noticed me.

Doc was kneeling on the floor, his face buried in his hands, his shoulders heaving. Jeb leaned over him, patting his back.

Jared and Kyle were laying a crude stretcher beside one of the cots in the middle of the room. Jared's face was hard-the mask had come back while he was away.

The cots were not empty, as they usually were. Something, hidden under dark green blankets, filled the length of both of them. Long and irregular, with familiar curves and angles...

Doc's homemade table was arranged at the head of these cots, in the brightest spot of sunlight. The table glittered with silver-shiny scalpels and an assortment of antiquated medical tools that I couldn't put a name to.

Brighter than these were other silver things. Shimmering segments of silver stretched in twisted, tortured pieces across the table... tiny silver strands plucked and naked and scattered... splatters of silver liquid smeared on the table, the blankets, the walls...

The quiet in the room was shattered by my scream. The whole room was shattered. It spun and shook to the sound, whirled around me so that I couldn't find the way out. The walls, the silver-stained walls, rose up to block my escape no matter which way I turned.

Someone shouted my name, but I couldn't hear whose voice it was. The screaming was too loud. It hurt my head. The stone wall, oozing silver, slammed into me, and I fell to the floor. Heavy hands held me there.

"Doc, help!"

"What's wrong with her?"

"Is it having a fit?"

"What did she see?"

"Nothing-nothing. The bodies were covered!"

That was a lie! The bodies were hideously uncovered, strewn in obscene contortions across the glittering table. Mutilated, dismembered, tortured bodies, ripped into grotesque shreds...

I had clearly seen the vestigial feelers still attached to the truncated anterior section of a child. Just a child! A baby! A baby thrown haphazardly in maimed pieces across the table smeared with its own blood...

My stomach rolled like the walls were rolling, and acid clawed its way up my throat.

"Wanda? Can you hear me?"

"Is she conscious?"

"I think she's going to throw up."

The last voice was right. Hard hands held my head while the acid in my stomach violently overflowed.

"What do we do, Doc?"

"Hold on to her-don't let her hurt herself."

I coughed and squirmed, trying to escape. My throat cleared.

"Let me go!" I was finally able to choke out. The words were garbled. "Get away from me! Get away; you're monsters! Torturers!"

I shrieked wordlessly again, twisting against the restraining arms.

"Calm down, Wanda! Shh! It's okay!" That was Jared's voice. For once, it didn't matter that it was Jared.

"Monster!" I screamed at him.

"She's hysterical," Doc told him. "Hold on."

A sharp, stinging blow whipped across my face.

There was a gasp, far away from the immediate chaos.

"What are you doing?" Ian roared.

"It's having a seizure or something, Ian. Doc's trying to bring it around."

My ears were ringing, but not from the slap. It was the smell-the smell of the silver blood dripping down the walls-the smell of the blood of souls. The room writhed around me as though it were alive. The light twisted into strange patterns, curved into the shapes of monsters from my past. A Vulture unfurled its wings... a claw beast swung its heavy pincers toward my face... Doc smiled and reached for me with silver trickling from his fingertips...

The room spun once more, slowly, and then went black.

Unconsciousness didn't claim me for long. It must have been only seconds later when my head cleared. I was all too lucid; I wished I could stay oblivious longer.

I was moving, rocking back and forth, and it was too black to see. Mercifully, the horrible smell had faded. The musty, humid air of the caves was like perfume.

The feeling of being carried, being cradled, was familiar. That first week after Kyle had injured me, I'd traveled many places in Ian's arms.

“. . . thought she'd have guessed what we were up to. Looks like I was wrong,” Jared was murmuring.

“You think that's what happened?” Ian's voice cut hard in the quiet tunnel. “That she was scared because Doc was trying to take the other souls out? That she was afraid for herself?”

Jared didn't answer for a minute. “You don't?”

Ian made a sound in the back of his throat. “No. I don't. As disgusted as I am that you would bring back more... victims for Doc, bring them back now!-as much as that turns my stomach, that's not what upset her. How can you be so blind? Can't you imagine what that must have looked like to her in there?”

“I know we had the bodies covered before -“

“The wrong bodies, Jared. Oh, I'm sure Wanda would be upset by a human corpse-she's so gentle; violence and death aren't a part of her normal world. But think what the things on that table must have meant to her.”

It took him another moment. “Oh.”

“Yes. If you or I had walked in on a human vivisection, with torn body parts, with blood splattered on everything, it wouldn't have been as bad for us as it was for her. We'd have seen it all before-even before the invasion, in horror movies, at least. I'd bet she's never been exposed to anything like that in all her lives.”

I was getting sick again. His words were bringing it back. The sight. The smell.

“Let me go,” I whispered. “Put me down.”

“I didn't mean to wake you. I'm sorry.” The last words were fervent, apologizing for more than waking me.

“Let me go.”

“You're not well. I'll take you to your room.”

“No. Put me down now.”

“Wanda -“

“Now!” I shouted. I shoved against Ian's chest, kicking my legs free at the same time. The ferocity of my struggle surprised him. He lost his hold on me, and I half fell into a crouch on the floor.

I sprang up from the crouch running.

“Wanda!”

“Let her go.”

“Don't touch me! Wanda, come back!”

It sounded like they were wrestling behind me, but I didn't slow. Of course they were fighting. They were humans. Violence was pleasure to them.

I didn't pause when I was back in the light. I sprinted through the big cavern without looking at any of the monsters there. I could feel their eyes on me, and I didn't care.

I didn't care where I was going, either. Just somewhere I could be alone. I avoided the tunnels that had people near them, running down the first empty one I could find.

It was the eastern tunnel. This was the second time I'd sprinted through this corridor today. Last time in joy, this time in horror. It was hard to remember how I'd felt this afternoon, knowing the raiders were home. Everything was dark and gruesome now, including their return. The very stones seemed evil.

This way was the right choice for me, though. No one had any reason to come here, and it was empty.

I ran to the farthest end of the tunnel, into the deep night of the empty game room. Could I really have played games with them such a short time ago? Believed the smiles on their faces, not seeing the beasts underneath...

I moved forward until I stumbled ankle deep into the oily waters of the dark spring. I backed away, my hand outstretched, searching for a wall. When I found a rough ridge of stone-sharp-edged beneath my fingers-I turned into the depression behind the protrusion and curled myself into a tight ball on the ground there.

It wasn't what we thought. Doc wasn't hurting anyone on purpose; he was just trying to save -

GET OUT OF MY HEAD! I shrieked.

As I thrust her away from me-gagged her so that I wouldn't have to bear her justifications-I realized how

weak she'd grown in all these months of friendliness. How much I'd been allowing. Encouraging.

It was almost too easy to silence her. As easy as it should have been from the beginning.

It was only me now. Just me, and the pain and the horror that I would never escape. I would never not have that image in my head again. I would never be free of it. It was forever a part of me.

I didn't know how to mourn here. I could not mourn in human ways for these lost souls whose names I would never know. For the broken child on the table.

I had never had to mourn on the Origin. I didn't know how it was done there, in the truest home of my kind. So I settled for the way of the Bats. It seemed appropriate, here where it was as black as being blind. The Bats mourned with silence-not singing for weeks on end until the pain of the nothingness left behind by the lack of music was worse than the pain of losing a soul. I'd known loss there. A friend, killed in a freak accident, a falling tree in the night, found too late to save him from the crushed body of his host. Spiraling... Upward... Harmony; those were the words that would have held his name in this language. Not exact, but close enough. There had been no horror in his death, only grief. An accident.

The bubbling stream was too discordant to remind me of our songs. I could grieve beside its harmony-free clatter.

I wrapped my arms tightly around my shoulders and mourned for the child and the other soul who had died with it. My siblings. My family. If I had found a way free of this place, if I had warned the Seekers, their remains would not be so casually mangled and mixed together in that blood-steeped room.

I wanted to cry, to keen in misery. But that was the human way. So I locked my lips and hunched in the darkness, holding the pain inside.

My silence, my mourning, was stolen from me.

It took them a few hours. I heard them looking, heard their voices echo and warp in the long tubes of air. They were calling for me, expecting an answer. When they received no answer, they brought lights. Not the dim blue lanterns that might never have revealed my hiding place here, buried under all this blackness, but the sharp yellow lances of flashlights. They swept back and forth, pendulums of light. Even with the flashlights, they didn't find me until the third search of the room. Why couldn't they leave me alone?

When the flashlight's beam finally disinterred me, there was a gasp of relief.

"I found her! Tell the others to get back inside! She's in here after all!"

I knew the voice, but I didn't put a name to it. Just another monster.

"Wanda? Wanda? Are you all right?"

I didn't raise my head or open my eyes. I was in mourning.

"Where's Ian?"

"Should we get Jamie, do you think?"

"He shouldn't be on that leg."

Jamie. I shuddered at his name. My Jamie. He was a monster, too. He was just like the rest of them. My Jamie. It was a physical pain to think of him.

"Where is she?"

"Over here, Jared. She's not... responding."

"We didn't touch her."

"Here, give me the light," Jared said. "Now, the rest of you, get out of here. Emergency over. Give her some air, okay?"

There was a shuffling noise that didn't travel far.

"Seriously, people. You're not helping. Leave. All the way out."

The shuffling was slow at first, but then became more productive. I could hear many footsteps fading away in the room and then disappearing out of it.

Jared waited until it was silent again.

"Okay, Wanda, it's just you and me."

He waited for some kind of answer.

"Look, I guess that must have been pretty... bad. We never wanted you to see that. I'm sorry."

Sorry? Geoffrey'd said it was Jared's idea. He wanted to cut me out, slice me into little pieces, fling my blood on the wall. He'd slowly mangle a million of me if he could find a way to keep his favorite monster alive with him. Slash us all to slivers.

He was quiet for a long time, still waiting for me to react.

"You look like you want to be alone. That's okay. I can keep them away, if that's what you want."

I didn't move.

I didn't move.

Something touched my shoulder. I cringed away from it, into the sharp stones.

"Sorry," he muttered.

I heard him stand, and the light-red behind my closed eyes-began to fade as he walked away.

He met someone in the mouth of the cave.

"Where is she?"

"She wants to be alone. Let her be."

"Don't get in my way again, Howe."

"Do you think she wants comfort from you? From a human?"

"I wasn't party to this -"

Jared answered in a lower voice, but I could still hear the echoes. "Not this time. You're one of us, Ian. Her enemy. Did you hear what she said in there? She was screaming monsters. That's how she sees us now. She doesn't want your comfort."

"Give me the light."

They didn't speak again. A minute passed, and I heard one set of slow footsteps moving around the edge of the room. Eventually, the light swept across me, turning my lids red again.

I huddled myself more tightly together, expecting him to touch me.

There was a quiet sigh, and then the sound of him sitting on the stone, not as close beside me as I would have expected.

With a click, the light disappeared.

I waited in the silence for a long time for him to speak, but he was just as silent as I was.

Finally, I stopped waiting and returned to my mourning. Ian did not interrupt. I sat in the blackness of the big hole in the ground and grieved for lost souls with a human at my side.

The Host

CHAPTER 41

Vanished

Ian sat with me for three days in the darkness.

He left for only a few short minutes at a time, to get us food and water. At first, Ian ate, though I did not. Then, as he realized that it wasn't a loss of appetite that left my tray full, he stopped eating, too.

I used his brief absences to deal with the physical needs that I could not ignore, thankful for the proximity of the odorous stream. As my fast lengthened, those needs vanished.

I couldn't keep from sleeping, but I did not make myself comfortable. The first day, I woke to find my head and shoulders cradled on his lap. I recoiled from him, shuddering so violently that he did not repeat the gesture. After that, I slumped against the stones where I was, and when I woke, I would curl back up into my silent ball at once.

"Please," Ian whispered on the third day-at least I thought it was the third day; there was no way to be sure of the passing time in this dark, silent place. It was the first time he'd spoken.

I knew a tray of food was in front of me. He pushed it closer, till it touched my leg. I cringed away.

"Please, Wanda. Please eat something."

He put his hand on my arm but moved away quickly when I flinched out from under it.

"Please don't hate me. I'm so sorry. If I'd known... I would have stopped them. I won't let it happen again."

He would never stop them. He was just one among many. And, as Jared had said, he'd had no objections before. I was the enemy. Even in the most compassionate, humankind's limited scope of mercy was reserved for their own.

I knew Doc could never intentionally inflict pain on another person. I doubted he would even be capable of watching such a thing, tender as his feelings were. But a worm, a centipede? Why would he care about the agony of a strange alien creature? Why would it bother him to murder a baby-slowly, slicing it apart piece by piece-if it had no human mouth to scream with?

"I should have told you," Ian whispered.

Would it have mattered if I'd simply been told rather than having seen the tortured remains for myself?

Would the pain be less strong?

“Please eat.”

The silence returned. We sat in it for a while, maybe another hour.

Ian got up and walked quietly away.

I could make no sense of my emotions. In that moment, I hated the body I was bound to. How did it make sense that his going depressed me? Why should it pain me to have the solitude I craved? I wanted the monster back, and that was plainly wrong.

I wasn't alone for long. I didn't know if Ian had gone to get him or if he'd been waiting for Ian to leave, but I recognized Jeb's contemplative whistle as it approached in the darkness.

The whistling stopped a few feet from me, and there was a loud click. A beam of yellow light burned my eyes. I blinked against it.

Jeb set the flashlight down, bulb up. It threw a circle of light on the low ceiling and made a wider, more diffuse sphere of light around us.

Jeb settled himself against the wall beside me.

“Gonna starve yourself, then? Is that the plan?”

I glared at the stone floor.

If I was being honest with myself, I knew that my mourning was over. I had grieved. I hadn't known the child or the other soul in the cave of horrors. I could not grieve for strangers forever. No, now I was angry.

“You wanna die, there are easier and faster ways.”

As if I wasn't aware of that.

“So give me to Doc, then,” I croaked.

Jeb wasn't surprised to hear me speak. He nodded to himself, as if this was exactly what he'd known would come out of my mouth.

“Did you expect us to just give up, Wanderer?” Jeb's voice was stern and more serious than I had ever heard it before. “We have a stronger survival instinct than that. Of course we want to find a way to get our minds back. It could be any one of us someday. So many people we love are already lost.

“It isn't easy. It nearly kills Doc each time he fails-you've seen that. But this is our reality, Wanda. This is our world. We've lost a war. We are about to be extinct. We're trying to find ways to save ourselves.”

For the first time, Jeb spoke to me as if I were a soul and not a human. I had a sense that the distinction had always been clear to him, though. He was just a courteous monster.

I couldn't deny the truth of what he was saying, or the sense of it. The shock had worn off, and I was myself again. It was in my nature to be fair.

Some few of these humans could see my side of things; Ian, at least. Then I, too, could consider their perspective. They were monsters, but maybe monsters who were justified in what they were doing.

Of course they would think violence was the answer. They wouldn't be able to imagine any other solution. Could I blame them that their genetic programming restricted their problem-solving abilities in this way?

I cleared my throat, but my voice was still hoarse with disuse. “Hacking up babies won't save anyone, Jeb. Now they're all dead.”

He was quiet for a moment. “We can't tell your young from your old.”

“No, I know that.”

“Your kind don't spare our babies.”

“We don't torture them, though. We never intentionally cause anyone pain.”

“You do worse than that. You erase them.”

“You do both.”

“We do, yes-because we have to try. We have to keep fighting. It's the only way we know. It's keep trying or turn our faces to the wall and die.” He raised one eyebrow at me.

That must have been what it looked like I was doing.

I sighed and took the water bottle Ian had left close to my foot. I drained it in one long pull, and then cleared my throat again.

“It will never work, Jeb. You can keep cutting us out in pieces, but you'll just murder more and more sentient creatures of both species. We do not willingly kill, but our bodies are not weak, either. Our attachments may look like soft silver hair, but they're stronger than your organs. That's what's happening, isn't it? Doc slices up my family, and their limbs shred through the brains of yours.”

“Like cottage cheese,” he agreed.

I gagged and then shuddered at the image.

“It makes me sick, too,” he admitted. “Doc gets real bent out of shape. Every time he thinks he’s got it cracked, it goes south again. He’s tried everything he can think of, but he can’t save them from getting turned into oatmeal. Your souls don’t respond to injected sedation... or poison.”

My voice came out rough with new horror. “Of course not. Our chemical makeup is completely different.”

“Once, one of yours seemed to guess what was going to happen. Before Doc could knock the human out, the silver thingy tore up his brain from the inside. Course, we didn’t know that until Doc opened him up. The guy just collapsed.”

I was surprised, strangely impressed. That soul must have been very brave. I had not had the courage to take that step, even in the beginning when I was sure they were going to try to torture this very information from me. I didn’t imagine they would try to slash the answer out for themselves; that course was so obviously doomed to failure, it had never occurred to me.

“Jeb, we are relatively tiny creatures, utterly dependent on unwilling hosts. We wouldn’t have lasted very long if we didn’t have some defenses.”

“I’m not denying that your kind have a right to those defenses. I’m just telling you that we’re gonna keep fighting back, however we can. We don’t mean to cause anyone pain. We’re makin’ this up as we go. But we will keep fighting.”

We looked at each other.

“Then maybe you should have Doc slice me up. What else am I good for?”

“Now, now. Don’t be silly, Wanda. We humans aren’t so logical as all that. We have a greater range of good and bad in us than you do. Well, maybe mostly the bad.”

I nodded at that, but he kept going, ignoring me.

“We value the individual. We probably put too much emphasis on the individual, if it comes right down to it. How many people, in the abstract, would... let’s say Paige... how many people would she sacrifice to keep Andy alive? The answer wouldn’t make any sense if you were looking at the whole of humanity as equals.

“The way you are valued here... Well, that don’t make much sense when you look at it from humanity’s perspective, either. But there’s some who would value you above a human stranger. Have to admit, I put myself in that group. I count you as a friend, Wanda. Course, that’s not gonna work well if you hate me.”

“I don’t hate you, Jeb. But...”

“Yeah?”

“I just don’t see how I can live here anymore. Not if you’re going to be slaughtering my family in the other room. And I can’t leave, obviously. So you see what I mean? What else is there for me but Doc’s pointless cutting?” I shuddered.

He nodded seriously. “Now, that’s a real valid point. It’s not fair to ask you to live with that.”

My stomach dropped. “If I get a choice, I’d rather you shot me, actually,” I whispered.

Jeb laughed. “Slow down there, honey. Nobody’s shooting my friends, or hackin’ ‘em up. I know you’re not lying, Wanda. If you say doing it our way isn’t going to work, then we’re going to have to rethink things. I’ll tell the boys they’re not to bring any more souls back for now. Besides, I think Doc’s nerves are toast. He can’t take much more of this.”

“You could be lying to me,” I reminded him. “I probably couldn’t tell.”

“You’ll have to trust me, then. Because I’m not going to shoot you. And I’m not going to let you starve yourself, either. Eat something, kid. That’s an order.”

I took a deep breath, trying to think. I wasn’t sure if we’d come to an accommodation or not. Nothing made sense in this body. I liked the people here too much. They were friends. Monstrous friends that I couldn’t see in the proper light while sunk in emotion.

Jeb picked up a thick square of cornbread soaked through with stolen honey and shoved it into my hand.

It made a mess there, crumbling into gluey morsels that stuck to my fingers. I sighed again and started cleaning them off with my tongue.

“That’s a girl! We’ll get over this rough spot. Things are gonna work out here, you’ll see. Try to think positive.”

“Think positive,” I mumbled around a mouthful of food, shaking my head with disbelief. Only Jeb...

Ian came back then. When he walked into our circle of light and saw the food in my hand, the look that spread across his face filled me with guilt. It was a look of joyous relief.

No, I had never intentionally caused anyone physical pain, but I had hurt Ian deeply enough just by hurting

myself. Human lives were so impossibly tangled. What a mess.

“Here you are, Jeb,” he said in a subdued voice as he sat down across from us, just slightly closer to Jeb. “Jared guessed you might be here.”

I dragged myself half a foot toward him, my arms aching from being motionless so long, and put my hand on his.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

He turned his hand up to hold mine. “Don’t apologize to me.”

“I should have known. Jeb’s right. Of course you fight back. How can I blame you for that?”

“It’s different with you here. It should have stopped.”

But my being here had only made it that much more important to solve the problem. How to rip me out and keep Melanie here. How to erase me to bring her back.

“All’s fair in war,” I murmured, trying to smile.

He grinned weakly back. “And love. You forgot that part.”

“Okay, break it up,” Jeb mumbled. “I’m not done here.”

I looked at him curiously. What more was there?

“Now.” He took a deep breath. “Try not to freak out again, okay?” he asked, looking at me.

I froze, gripping Ian’s hand tighter.

Ian threw an anxious glance at Jeb.

“You’re going to tell her?” Ian asked.

“What now?” I gasped. “What is it now?”

Jeb had his poker face on. “It’s Jamie.”

Those two words turned the world upside down again.

For three long days, I’d been Wanderer, a soul among humans. I was suddenly Wanda again, a very confused soul with human emotions that were too powerful to control.

I jumped to my feet-yanking Ian up with me, my hand locked on his like a vise-and then swayed, my head spinning.

“Sheesh. I said don’t freak out, Wanda. Jamie’s okay. He’s just really anxious about you. He heard what happened, and he’s been asking for you-worried out of his mind, that kid is-and I don’t think it’s good for him. I came down here to ask you to go see him. But you can’t go like this. You look horrible. It will just upset him for no good reason. Sit down and eat some more food.”

“His leg?” I demanded.

“There’s a little infection,” Ian murmured. “Doc wants him to stay down or he’d have come to get you a long time ago. If Jared wasn’t practically pinning him to the bed, he would have come anyway.”

Jeb nodded. “Jared almost came here and carried you out by force, but I told him to let me speak to you first. It wouldn’t do the kid any good to see you catatonic.”

My blood felt as though it had changed into ice water. Surely just my imagination.

“What’s being done?”

Jeb shrugged. “Nothin’ to do. Kid’s strong; he’ll fight it off.”

“Nothing to do? What do you mean?”

“It’s a bacterial infection,” Ian said. “We don’t have antibiotics anymore.”

“Because they don’t work-the bacteria are smarter than your medicines. There has to be something better, something else.”

“Well, we don’t have anything else,” Jeb said. “He’s a healthy kid. It just has to run its course.”

“Run... its... course.” I murmured the words in a daze.

“Eat something,” Ian urged. “You’ll worry him if he sees you like this.”

I rubbed my eyes, trying to think straight.

Jamie was sick. There was nothing to treat him with here. No options but waiting to see if his body could heal itself. And if it couldn’t...

“No,” I gasped.

I felt as if I were standing on the edge of Walter’s grave again, listening to the sound of sand falling into the darkness.

“No,” I moaned, fighting against the memory.

I turned mechanically and started walking with stiff strides toward the exit.

“Wait,” Ian said, but he didn’t pull against the hand he still held. He kept pace with me.

Jeb caught up to me on the other side and shoved more food into my free hand.

“Eat for the kid’s sake,” he said.

I bit into it without tasting, chewed without thinking, swallowed without feeling the food go down.

“Knew she was gonna overreact,” Jeb grumbled.

“So why did you tell her?” Ian asked, frustrated.

Jeb didn’t answer. I wondered why he didn’t. Was this worse even than I imagined?

“Is he in the hospital?” I asked in an emotionless, inflectionless voice.

“No, no,” Ian assured me quickly. “He’s in your room.”

I didn’t even feel relief. Too numb for that.

I would have gone into that room again for Jamie, even if it was still reeking of blood.

I didn’t see the familiar caves I walked through. I barely noticed that it was day. I couldn’t meet the eyes of any of the humans who stopped to stare at me. I could only put one foot in front of the other until I finally reached the hallway.

There were a few people clustered in front of the seventh cave. The silk screen was pushed far aside, and they craned their necks to see into Jared’s room. They were all familiar, people I’d considered friends. Jamie’s friends, too. Why were they here? Was his condition so unstable that they needed to check on him often?

“Wanda,” someone said. Heidi. “Wanda’s here.”

“Let her through,” Wes said. He slapped Jeb on the back. “Good job.”

I walked through the little group without looking at them. They parted for me; I might have walked right into them if they hadn’t. I couldn’t concentrate on anything but moving myself forward.

It was bright in the high-ceilinged room. The room itself was not crowded. Doc or Jared had kept everyone out. I was vaguely aware of Jared, leaning against the far wall with his hands clasped behind him—a posture he assumed only when he was really worried. Doc knelt beside the big bed where Jamie lay, just where I had left him.

Why had I left him?

Jamie’s face was red and sweaty. The right leg of his jeans had been cut away, and the bandage was peeled back from his wound. It wasn’t as big as I’d expected. Not as horrible as I would have imagined. Just a two-inch gash with smooth edges. But the edges were a frightening shade of red, and the skin around the cut was swollen and shiny.

“Wanda,” Jamie exhaled when he saw me. “Oh, you’re okay. Oh.” He took a deep breath.

I stumbled and fell to my knees beside him, dragging Ian down with me. I touched Jamie’s face and felt the skin burn under my hand. My elbow brushed Doc’s, but I barely noticed. He scooted away, but I didn’t look to see what emotion was on his face, whether it was aversion or guilt.

“Jamie, baby, how are you?”

“Stupid,” he said, grinning. “Just plain stupid. Can you believe this?” He gestured to his leg. “Of all the luck.”

I found a wet rag on his pillow and wiped it across his forehead.

“You’re going to be fine,” I promised. I was surprised at how fierce my voice sounded.

“Of course. It’s nothing. But Jared wouldn’t let me come talk to you.” His face was suddenly anxious. “I heard about... and Wanda, you know I—”

“Shh. Don’t even think of it. If I’d had any idea you were sick I would have been here sooner.”

“I’m not really sick. Just a stupid infection. I’m glad you’re here, though. I hated not knowing how you were.”

I couldn’t swallow down the lump in my throat. Monster? My Jamie? Never.

“So I heard you schooled Wes the day we got back,” Jamie said, changing the subject with a wide grin. “Man, I wish I could have seen that! I bet Melanie loved it.”

“Yes, she did.”

“She okay? Not too worried?”

“Of course she’s worried,” I murmured, watching the cloth travel across his forehead as if it were someone else’s hand moving it.

Melanie.

Where was she?

I searched through my head for her familiar voice. There was nothing but silence. Why wasn’t she here? Jamie’s skin was burning where my fingers brushed it. The feel of it—that unwholesome heat—should have had her in the same panic I was feeling.

net in the same panic I was feeling.

“You okay?” Jamie asked. “Wanda?”

“I’m... tired. Jamie, I’m sorry. I’m just... out of it.”

He eyed me carefully. “You don’t look so good.”

What had I done?

“I haven’t cleaned up in a while.”

“I’m fine, you know. You should go eat or something. You’re pale.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“I’ll get you some food,” Ian said. “You hungry, kid?”

“Ah... no, not really.”

My eyes flashed back to Jamie. Jamie was always hungry.

“Send someone else,” I told Ian, gripping his hand tighter.

“Sure.” His face was smooth, but I could sense both surprise and worry. “Wes, could you get some food? Something for Jamie, too. I’m sure he’ll find that appetite by the time you get back.”

I measured Jamie’s face. He was flushed, but his eyes were bright. He would be okay for a few minutes if I left him here.

“Jamie, do you mind if I go wash my face? I feel sort of... grimy.”

He frowned at the false note in my voice. “Course not.”

I pulled Ian up with me again as I rose. “I’ll be right back. I mean it this time.”

He smiled at my weak joke.

I felt someone’s eyes on me as I left the room. Jared’s or Doc’s, I didn’t know. I didn’t care.

Only Jeb still stood in the hallway now; the others had gone, reassured, perhaps, that Jamie was doing okay. Jeb’s head tilted to the side, curious, as he tried to figure out what I was doing. He was surprised to see me leave Jamie’s side so soon and so abruptly. He, too, had heard the sham in my excuse.

I hurried past his inquisitive gaze, towing Ian with me.

I dragged Ian back through the room where the tunnels to all the living quarters met in a big tangle of openings. Instead of keeping on toward the main plaza, I pulled him into one of the dark corridors, picking at random. It was deserted.

“Wanda, what -“

“I need you to help me, Ian.” My voice was strained, frantic.

“Whatever you need. You know that.”

I put my hands on either side of his face, staring into his eyes. I could barely see a glint of their blue in the darkness.

“I need you to kiss me, Ian. Now. Please.”

The Host

CHAPTER 42

Forced

Ian’s jaw fell slack. “You... what?”

“I’ll explain in a minute. This isn’t fair to you, but... please. Just kiss me.”

“It won’t upset you? Melanie won’t bother you?”

“Ian!” I complained. “Please!”

Still confused, he put his hands on my waist and pulled my body against his. His face was so worried, I wondered if this would even work. I hardly needed the romance, but maybe he did.

He closed his eyes as he leaned toward me, an automatic thing. His lips pressed lightly against mine once, and then he pulled back to look at me with the same worried expression.

Nothing.

“No, Ian. Really kiss me. Like... like you’re trying to get slapped. Do you understand?”

“No. What’s wrong? Tell me first.”

I put my arms around his neck. It felt strange; I wasn’t at all sure how to do this right. I pushed up on my toes and pulled his head down at the same time until I could reach his lips with mine.

This wouldn’t have worked with another species. Another mind wouldn’t have been so easily

overwhelmed by its body. Other species had their priorities in better order. But Ian was human, and his body responded.

I shoved my mouth against his, gripping his neck tighter with my arms when his first reaction was to hold me away. Remembering how his mouth had moved with mine before, I tried to mimic that movement now. His lips opened with mine, and I felt an odd thrill of triumph at my success. I caught his lower lip between my teeth and heard a low, wild sound break from his throat in surprise.

And then I didn't have to try anymore. One of Ian's hands trapped my face, while the other clamped around the small of my back, holding me so close that it was hard to pull a breath into my constricted chest. I was gasping, but so was he. His breath mingled with mine. I felt the stone wall touch my back, press against it. He used it to bind me even closer. There was no part of me that wasn't fused to part of him.

It was just the two of us, so close that we hardly counted as two.

Just us.

No one else.

Alone.

Ian felt it when I gave up. He must have been waiting for this-not as entirely ruled by his body as I'd imagined. He eased back as soon as my arms went limp, but kept his face next to mine, the tip of his nose touching the tip of mine.

I dropped my arms, and he took a deep breath. Slowly, he loosened both his hands and then placed them lightly on my shoulders.

"Explain," he said.

"She's not here," I whispered, still breathing in gasps. "I can't find her. Not even now."

"Melanie?"

"I can't hear her! Ian, how can I go back in to Jamie? He'll know that I'm lying! How can I tell him that I've lost his sister now? Ian, he's sick! I can't tell him that! I'll upset him, make it harder for him to get well. I -"

Ian's fingers pressed against my lips. "Shh, shh. Okay. Let's think about this. When was the last time you heard her?"

"Oh, Ian! It was right after I saw... in the hospital. And she tried to defend them... and I screamed at her... and I-I made her go away! And I haven't heard her since. I can't find her!"

"Shh," he said again. "Calmly. Okay. Now, what do you really want? I know you don't want to upset Jamie, but he's going to be fine regardless. So, consider-would it be better, just for you, if -"

"No! I can't erase Melanie! I can't. That would be wrong! That would make me a monster, too!"

"Okay, okay! Okay. Shh. So we have to find her?"

I nodded urgently.

He took another deep breath. "Then you need to... really be overwhelmed, don't you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

I was afraid I did, though.

Kissing Ian was one thing-even a pleasant thing, maybe, if I wasn't so racked with worry-but anything more... elaborate... Could I? Mel would be furious if I used her body that way. Was that what I had to do to find her? But what about Ian? It was so grossly unfair to him.

"I'll be right back," Ian promised. "Stay here."

He pressed me against the wall for emphasis and then ducked back out into the hallway.

It was hard to obey. I wanted to follow him, to see what he was doing and where he was going. We had to talk about this; I had to think it through. But I had no time. Jamie was waiting for me, with questions that I couldn't answer with lies. No, he wasn't waiting for me; he was waiting for Melanie. How could I have done this? What if she was really gone?

Mel, Mel, Mel, come back! Melanie, Jamie needs you. Not me-he needs you. He's sick, Mel. Mel, can you hear that? Jamie is sick!

I was talking to myself. No one heard.

My hands were trembling with fear and stress. I wouldn't be able to wait here much longer. I felt like the anxiety was going to make me swell until I popped.

Finally, I heard footsteps. And voices. Ian wasn't alone. Confusion swept through me.

"Just think of it as... an experiment," Ian was saying.

"Are you crazy?" Jared answered. "Is this some sick joke?"

My stomach dropped through the floor.

Overwhelmed. That's what he'd meant.

Blood burned in my face, hot as Jamie's fever. What was Ian doing to me? I wanted to run, to hide somewhere better than my last hiding place, somewhere I could never, ever be found, no matter how many flashlights they used. But my legs were shaking, and I couldn't move.

Ian and Jared came into view in the room where the tunnels met. Ian's face was expressionless; he had one hand on Jared's shoulder and was guiding him, almost pushing him forward. Jared was staring at Ian with anger and doubt.

"Through here," Ian encouraged, forcing Jared toward me. I flattened my back against the rock.

Jared saw me, saw my mortified expression, and stopped.

"Wanda, what's this about?"

I threw Ian one blazing glance of reproach and then tried to meet Jared's eyes.

I couldn't do it. I looked at his feet instead.

"I lost Melanie," I whispered.

"You lost her!"

I nodded miserably.

His voice was hard and angry. "How?"

"I'm not sure. I made her be quiet... but she always comes back... always before... I can't hear her now... and Jamie..."

"She's gone?" Muted agony in his voice.

"I don't know. I can't find her."

Deep breath. "Why does Ian think I have to kiss you?"

"Not kiss me," I said, my voice so faint I could barely hear it myself. "Kiss her. Nothing upset her more than when you kissed us... before. Nothing pulled her to the surface like that. Maybe... No. You don't have to. I'll try to find her myself."

I still had my eyes on his feet, so I saw him step toward me.

"You think, if I kiss her...?"

I couldn't even nod. I tried to swallow.

Familiar hands brushed my neck, tracing down either side to my shoulders. My heart thudded loud enough that I wondered if he could hear it.

I was so embarrassed, forcing him to touch me this way. What if he thought it was a trick-my idea, not Ian's?

I wondered if Ian was still there, watching. How much would this hurt him?

One hand continued, as I knew it would, down my arm to my wrist, leaving a trail of fire behind it. The other cupped beneath my jaw, as I knew it must, and pulled my face up.

His cheek pressed against mine, the skin burning where we were connected, and he whispered in my ear.

"Melanie. I know you're there. Come back to me."

His cheek slowly slid back, and his chin tilted to the side so that his mouth covered mine.

He tried to kiss me softly. I could tell that he tried. But his intentions went up in smoke, just like before.

There was fire everywhere, because he was everywhere. His hands traced my skin, burning it. His lips tasted every inch of my face. The rock wall slammed into my back, but there was no pain. I couldn't feel anything besides the burning.

My hands knotted in his hair, pulling him to me as if there were any possible way for us to be closer. My legs wrapped around his waist, the wall giving me the leverage I needed. His tongue twisted with mine, and there was no part of my mind that was not invaded by the insane desire that possessed me.

He pulled his mouth free and pressed his lips to my ear again.

"Melanie Stryder!" It was so loud in my ear, a growl that was almost a shout. "You will not leave me. Don't you love me? Prove it! Prove it! Damn it, Mel! Get back here!"

His lips attacked mine again.

Ahhh, she groaned weakly in my head.

I couldn't think to greet her. I was on fire.

The fire burned its way to her, back to the tiny corner where she drooped, nearly lifeless.

My hands fisted around the fabric of Jared's T-shirt, yanking it up. This was their idea; I didn't tell them what to do. His hands burned on the skin of my back.

Jared? she whispered. She tried to orient herself, but the mind we shared was so disoriented.

I felt the muscles of his stomach under my palms, my hands crushed between us.

What? Where... Melanie struggled.

I broke away from his mouth to breathe, and his lips scorched their way down my throat. I buried my face in his hair, inhaling the scent.

Jared! Jared! NO!

I let her flow through my arms, knowing this was what I wanted, though I could barely pay attention now. The hands on his stomach turned hard, angry. The fingers clawed at his skin and then shoved him as hard as they could.

“NO!” she shouted through my lips.

Jared caught her hands, then caught me against the wall before I could fall. I sagged, my body confused by the conflicting directions it was receiving.

“Mel? Mel!”

“What are you doing?”

He groaned in relief. “I knew you could do it! Ah, Mel!”

He kissed her again, kissed the lips that she now controlled, and we could both taste the tears that ran down his face.

She bit him.

Jared jumped back from us, and I slid to the floor, landing in a wilted heap.

He started laughing. “That’s my girl. You still got her, Wanda?”

“Yes,” I gasped.

What the hell, Wanda? she screeched at me.

Where have you been? Do you have any idea what I’ve been going through trying to find you?

Yeah, I can see that you were really suffering.

Oh, I’ll suffer, I promised her. I could already feel it coming on. Just like before...

She was flipping through my thoughts as fast as she could. Jamie?

That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. He needs you.

Then why aren’t we with him?

Because he’s probably a bit young to watch this kind of thing.

She searched through some more. Wow, Ian, too. I’m glad I missed that part.

I was so worried. I didn’t know what to do....

Well, c’mon. Let’s go.

“Mel?” Jared asked.

“She’s here. She’s furious. She wants to see Jamie.”

Jared put his arm around me and helped me up. “You can be as mad as you want, Mel. Just stick around.”

How long was I gone?

Three days is all.

Her voice was suddenly smaller. Where was I?

You don’t know?

I can’t remember... anything.

We shuddered.

“You okay?” Jared asked.

“Sort of.”

“Was that her before, talking to me-talking out loud?”

“Yes.”

“Can she... can you let her do that now?”

I sighed. I was already exhausted. “I can try.” I closed my eyes.

Can you get past me? I asked her. Can you talk to him?

I... How? Where?

I tried to flatten myself against the inside of my head. “C’mon,” I murmured. “Here.”

Melanie struggled, but there was no way out.

Jared’s lips came down on mine, hard. My eyes flew open in shock. His gold-flecked eyes were open, too, half an inch away.

She jerked our head back. “Cut that out! Don’t touch her!”

He smiled, the little creases feathering out around his eyes. “Hey, baby.”

I nat's not runny.

I tried to breathe again. "She's not laughing."

He left his arm around me. Around us. We walked out into the tunnel junction, and there was no one there. No Ian.

"I'm warning you, Mel," Jared said, still smiling widely. Teasing. "You better stay right here. I'm not making any guarantees about what I will or won't do to get you back."

My stomach fluttered.

Tell him I'll throttle him if he touches you like that again. But her threat was a joke, too.

"She's threatening your life right now," I told him. "But I think she's being facetious."

He laughed, giddy with relief. "You're so serious all the time, Wanda."

"Your jokes aren't funny," I muttered. Not to me.

Jared laughed again.

Ah, Melanie said. You are suffering.

I'll try not to let Jamie see.

Thank you for bringing me back.

I won't erase you, Melanie. I'm sorry I can't give you more than that.

Thank you.

"What's she saying?"

"We're just... making up."

"Why couldn't she talk before, when you were trying to let her?"

"I don't know, Jared. There really isn't enough room for both of us. I can't seem to get myself out of the way completely. It's like... not like holding your breath. Like trying to pause your heartbeats. I can't make myself not exist. I don't know how."

He didn't answer, and my chest throbbed with pain. How joyful he would be if I could figure out how to erase myself!

Melanie wanted to... not to contradict me, but to make me feel better; she struggled to find words to soften my agony. She couldn't come up with the right ones.

But Ian would be devastated. And Jamie. Jeb would miss you. You have so many friends here.

Thanks.

I was glad that we were back to our room now. I needed to think about something else before I started crying. Now wasn't the time for self-pity. There were more important issues at hand than my heart, breaking yet again.

The Host

CHAPTER 43

Frenzied

I imagined that from the outside, I looked as still as a statue. My hands were folded in front of me, my face was without expression, my breathing was too shallow to move my chest.

Inside, I was spinning apart, as if the pieces of my atoms were reversing polarity and blowing away from one another.

Bringing Melanie back had not saved him. All that I could do was not enough.

The hall outside our room was crowded. Jared, Kyle, and Ian were back from their desperate raid, empty-handed. A cooler of ice-that was all they had to show for three days of risking their lives. Trudy was making compresses and laying them across Jamie's forehead, the back of his neck, his chest.

Even if the ice cooled the fever, raging out of control, how long until it was all melted? An hour? More? Less? How long until he was dying again?

I would have been the one to put the ice on him, but I couldn't move. If I moved, I would fall into microscopic pieces.

"Nothing?" Doc murmured. "Did you check -"

"Every spot we could think of," Kyle interrupted. "It's not like painkillers, drugs-lots of people had reason to keep those hidden. The antibiotics were always kept in the open. They're gone, Doc."

Jared just stared down at the red-faced child on the bed, not speaking.

Jared just stared down at the red-faced child on the bed, not speaking.

Ian stood beside me. "Don't look like that," he whispered. "He'll pull through. He's tough."

I couldn't respond. Couldn't even hear the words, really.

Doc knelt beside Trudy and pulled Jamie's chin down. With a bowl he scooped up some of the ice water from the cooler and let it trickle into Jamie's mouth. We all heard the thick, painful sound of Jamie's swallowing. But his eyes didn't open.

I felt as though I would never be able to move again. That I would turn into part of the stone wall. I wanted to be stone.

If they dug a hole for Jamie in the empty desert, they would have to put me in it, too.

Not good enough, Melanie growled.

I was despairing, but she was filled with fury.

They tried.

Trying solves nothing. Jamie will not die. They have to go back out.

For what purpose? Even if they did find your old antibiotics, what are the chances they would still be any good? They only worked half the time anyway. Inferior. He doesn't need your medicine. He needs more than that. Something that really works...

My breathing sped up, deepened as I saw it.

He needs mine, I realized.

Mel and I were both awestruck by the obviousness of this idea. The simplicity of it.

My stone lips cracked apart. "Jamie needs real medicines. The ones the souls have. We need to get him those."

Doc frowned at me. "We don't even know what those things do, how they work."

"Does it matter?" Some of Melanie's anger was seeping into my voice. "They do work. They can save him."

Jared stared at me. I could feel Ian's eyes on me, too, and Kyle's, and all the rest in the room. But I saw only Jared.

"We can't get 'em, Wanda," Jeb said, his tone already one of defeat. Giving up. "We can only get into deserted places. There's always a bunch of your kind in a hospital. Twenty-four hours a day. Too many eyes. We won't do Jamie any good if we get caught."

"Sure," Kyle said in a hard voice. "The centipedes will be only too happy to heal his body when they find us here. And make him one of them. Is that what you're after?"

I turned to glare at the big, sneering man. My body tensed and leaned forward. Ian put his hand on my shoulder as if he were holding me back. I didn't think I would have made any aggressive move toward Kyle, but maybe I was wrong. I was so far from my normal self.

When I spoke, my voice was dead even, no inflection. "There has to be a way."

Jared was nodding. "Maybe someplace small. The gun would make too much noise, but if there were enough of us to overwhelm them, we could use knives."

"No." My arms came unfolded, my hands falling open in shock. "No. That's not what I meant. Not killing

No one even listened to me. Jeb was arguing with Jared.

"There's no way, kid. Somebody'd get a call off to the Seekers. Even if we were in and out, something like that would bring 'em down on us in force. We'd be hard-pressed to make it out at all. And they'd follow."

"Wait. Can't you -"

They still weren't listening to me.

"I don't want the boy to die, either, but we can't risk everyone's lives for one person," Kyle said. "People die here; it happens. We can't get crazy to save one boy."

I wanted to choke him, to cut off his air in order to stop his calm words. Me, not Melanie. I was the one who wanted to turn his face purple. Melanie felt the same way, but I could tell how much of the violence came directly from me.

"We have to save him," I said, louder now.

Jeb looked at me. "Hon, we can't just walk in there and ask."

Right then, another very simple and obvious truth occurred to me.

"You can't. But I can."

The room fell dead silent.

I was caught up in the beauty of the plan forming in my head. The perfection of it. I spoke mostly to

myself, and to Melanie. She was impressed. This would work. We could save Jamie.

"They aren't suspicious. Not at all. Even if I'm a horrible liar, they would never suspect me of anything. They wouldn't be listening for lies. Of course not. I'm one of them. They would do anything to help me. I'd say I got hurt hiking or something... and then I'd find a way to be alone and I'd take as much as I could hide. Think of it! I could get enough to heal everyone here. To last for years. And Jamie would be fine! Why didn't I think of this before? Maybe it wouldn't have been too late even for Walter."

I looked up then, with shining eyes. It was just so perfect!

So perfect, so absolutely right, so obvious to me, that it took me forever to understand the expressions on their faces. If Kyle's had not been so explicit, it might have taken me longer.

Hatred. Suspicion. Fear.

Even Jeb's poker face was not enough. His eyes were tight with mistrust.

Every face said no.

Are they insane? Can't they see how this would help us all?

They don't believe me. They think I'll hurt them, hurt Jamie!

"Please," I whispered. "It's the only way to save him."

"Patient, isn't it?" Kyle spit. "Bided its time well, don't you think?"

I fought the desire to choke him again.

"Doc?" I begged.

He didn't meet my eyes. "Even if there was any way we could let you outside, Wanda... I just couldn't trust drugs I don't understand. Jamie's a tough kid. His system will fight this off."

"We'll go out again, Wanda," Ian murmured. "We'll find something. We won't come back until we do."

"That's not good enough." The tears were pooling in my eyes. I looked to the one person who might possibly be in as much pain as I was. "Jared. You know. You know I would never let anything hurt Jamie. You know I can do this. Please."

He met my gaze for one long moment. Then he looked around the room, at every other face. Jeb, Doc, Kyle, Ian, Trudy. Out the door at the silent audience whose expressions mirrored Kyle's: Sharon, Violetta, Lucina, Reid, Geoffrey, Heath, Heidi, Andy, Aaron, Wes, Lily, Carol. My friends mixed in with my enemies, all of them wearing Kyle's face. He stared at the next row, which I couldn't see. Then he looked down at Jamie. There was no sound of breathing in the whole room.

"No, Wanda," he said quietly. "No."

A sigh of relief from the rest.

My knees buckled. I fell forward and yanked free of Ian's hands when he tried to pull me back up. I crawled to Jamie and pushed Trudy aside with my elbow. The silent room watched. I took the compress from his head and refilled the melted ice. I didn't meet the stares I could feel on my skin. I couldn't see anyway. The tears swam in front of my eyes.

"Jamie, Jamie, Jamie," I crooned. "Jamie, Jamie, Jamie."

I couldn't seem to do anything but sob out his name and touch the packets of ice over and over, waiting for the moment they would need changing.

I heard them leave, a few at a time. I heard their voices, mostly angry, fade away down the halls. I couldn't make sense of the words, though.

Jamie, Jamie, Jamie...

"Jamie, Jamie, Jamie..."

Ian knelt beside me when the room was almost empty.

"I know you wouldn't... but Wanda, they'll kill you if you try," he whispered. "After what happened... in the hospital. They're afraid you have good reason to destroy us.... Anyway, he'll be all right. You have to trust that."

I turned my face from him, and he went away.

"Sorry, kid," Jeb mumbled when he left.

Jared left. I didn't hear him go, but I knew when he was gone. That seemed right to me. He didn't love Jamie the way we did. He had proved that. He should go.

Doc stayed, watching helplessly. I didn't look at him.

The daylight faded slowly, turned orange and then gray. The ice melted and was gone. Jamie started to burn alive under my hands.

"Jamie, Jamie, Jamie..." My voice was cracked and hoarse now, but I couldn't stop. "Jamie, Jamie,

Jamie...”

The room turned black. I couldn't see Jamie's face. Would he leave in the night? Had I already seen his face, his living face, for the last time?

His name was just a whisper on my lips now, low enough that I could hear Doc's quiet snoring.

I wiped the tepid cloth across his body without ceasing. As the water dried, it cooled him a little. The burn lessened. I began to believe that he wouldn't die tonight. But I wouldn't be able to hold him here forever. He would slip away from me. Tomorrow. The next day. And then I would die, too. I would not live without Jamie.

Jamie, Jamie, Jamie... Melanie groaned.

Jared didn't believe us. The lament was both of ours. We thought it at the same time.

It was still silent. I didn't hear anything. Nothing alerted me.

Then, suddenly, Doc cried out. The sound was oddly muffled, like he was shouting into a pillow.

My eyes couldn't make sense of the shapes in the darkness at first. Doc was jerking strangely. And he seemed too big-like he had too many arms. It was terrifying. I leaned over Jamie's inert form, to protect him from whatever was happening. I could not flee while he lay helpless. My heart pounded against my ribs.

Then the flailing arms were still. Doc's snore started up again, louder and thicker than before. He slumped to the ground, and the shape separated. A second figure pulled itself away from his and stood in the darkness.

“Let's go,” Jared whispered. “We don't have time to waste.”

My heart nearly exploded.

He believes.

I jumped to my feet, forcing my stiff knees to unbend. “What did you do to Doc?”

“Chloroform. It won't last long.”

I turned quickly and poured the warm water over Jamie, soaking his clothes and the mattress. He didn't stir. Perhaps that would keep him cool until Doc woke up.

“Follow me.”

I was on his heels. We moved silently, almost touching, almost running but not quite. Jared hugged the walls, and I did the same.

He stopped when we reached the light of the moon-bright garden room. It was deserted and still.

I could see Jared clearly for the first time. He had the gun slung behind his back and a knife sheathed at his waist. He held out his hands, and there was a length of dark fabric in them. I understood at once.

The whispered words raced out of my mouth. “Yes, blindfold me.”

He nodded, and I closed my eyes while he tied the cloth over them. I would keep them closed anyway.

The knot was quick and tight. When he was done, I spun myself in a fast circle-once, twice...

His hands stopped me. “That's okay,” he said. And then he gripped me harder and lifted me off the ground. I gasped in surprise as he threw me against his shoulder. I folded there, my head and chest hanging over his back, beside the gun. His arms held my legs against his chest, and he was already moving. I bounced as he jogged, my face brushing against his shirt with each stride.

I had no sense of which way we were going; I didn't try to guess or think or feel. I concentrated only on the bouncing of his gait, counting steps. Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three...

I could feel him lean as the path took him down and then up. I tried not to think about it.

Four hundred twelve, four hundred thirteen, four hundred fourteen...

I knew when we were out. I smelled the dry, clean breeze of the desert. The air was hot, though it had to be close to midnight.

He pulled me down and set me on my feet.

“The ground is flat. Do you think you can run blindfolded?”

“Yes.”

He grabbed my elbow tightly in his hand and took off, setting a rigorous pace. It wasn't easy. He caught me time and time again before I could fall. I started to get used to it after a while, and I kept my balance better over the tiny pits and rises. We ran until we were both gasping.

“If... we can get... to the jeep... we'll be in... the clear.”

The jeep? I felt a strange wave of nostalgia. Mel hadn't seen the jeep since the first leg of that disastrous trip to Chicago, hadn't known it had survived.

“If we... can't?” I asked.

“They catch us... they'll kill you. Ian's... right about... that part.”

I tried to run faster. Not to save my life, but because I was the only one who could save Jamie's. I stumbled

again.

“Going to... take off the blindfold. You’ll be... faster.”

“You sure?”

“Don’t... look around. ‘Kay?”

“Promise.”

He yanked at the knots behind my head. As the fabric fell away from my eyes, I focused them only on the ground at my feet.

It made a world of difference. The moonlight was bright, and the sand was very smooth and pale. Jared dropped his arm and broke into a faster stride. I kept up easily now. Distance running was familiar to my body. I settled into my preferred stride. Just over a six-minute mile, I’d guess. I couldn’t keep up that pace forever, but I’d run myself into the ground trying.

“You hear... anything?” he asked.

I listened. Just two sets of running feet on the sand.

“No.”

He grunted in approval.

I guessed this was the reason he’d stolen the gun. They couldn’t stop us from a distance without it.

It took about an hour more. I was slowing then, and so was he. My mouth burned for water.

I’d never looked up from the ground, so it startled me when he put his hand over my eyes. I faltered, and he pulled us to a walk.

“We’re okay now. Just ahead...”

He left his hand over my eyes and tugged me forward. I heard our footsteps echo off something. The desert wasn’t as flat here.

“Get in.”

His hand disappeared.

It was nearly as dark as it was with him covering my eyes. Another cave. Not a deep one. If I turned around, I would be able to see out of it. I didn’t turn.

The jeep faced into the darkness. It looked just the same as I remembered it, this vehicle I had never seen. I swung myself over the door into the seat.

Jared was in his seat already. He leaned over and tied the blindfold over my eyes again. I held still to make it easier.

The noise of the engine scared me. It seemed too dangerous. There were so many people who shouldn’t find us now.

We moved in reverse briefly, and then the wind was blasting my face. There was a funny sound behind the jeep, something that didn’t fit Melanie’s memories.

“We’re going to Tucson,” he told me. “We never raid there—it’s too close. But we don’t have time for anything else. I know where a small hospital is, not too deep into town.”

“Not Saint Mary’s?”

He heard the alarm in my voice. “No, why?”

“I know someone there.”

He was quiet for a minute. “Will you be recognized?”

“No. No one will know my face. We don’t have... wanted people. Not like you did.”

“Okay.”

But he had me thinking now, thinking about my appearance. Before I could voice my concerns, he took my hand and folded it around something very small.

“Keep that close to you.”

“What is it?”

“If they guess that you’re... with us, if they’re going to... put someone else in Mel’s body, you put that in your mouth and bite down on it hard.”

“Poison?”

“Yes.”

I thought about that for a moment. And then I laughed; I couldn’t help it. My nerves were frayed with worry.

“It’s not a joke, Wanda,” he said angrily. “If you can’t do it, then I have to take you back.”

“No, no, I can.” I tried to get a hold of myself. “I know I can. That’s why I’m laughing.”

“I know I can. That’s why I’m laughing.”

His voice was nasally. I don't get the joke.

"Don't you see? For millions of my own kind, I've never been able to do that. Not for my own... children. I was always too afraid to die that final time. But I can do it for one alien child." I laughed again. "It doesn't make any sense. Don't worry, though. I can die to protect Jamie."

"I'm trusting you to do just that."

It was silent for a moment, and then I remembered what I looked like.

"Jared, I don't look right. For walking into a hospital."

"We've got better clothes stashed with the... less-conspicuous vehicles. That's where we're headed now. About five more minutes."

That wasn't what I meant, but he was right. These clothes would never do. I waited to talk to him about the rest. I needed to look at myself first.

The jeep stopped, and he pulled off the blindfold.

"You don't have to keep your eyes down," he told me when my head ducked automatically. "There's nothing here to give us away. Just in case this place was ever discovered."

It wasn't a cave. It was a rock slide. A few of the bigger boulders had been carefully excavated, leaving clever dark spaces under them that no one would suspect of housing anything but dirt and smaller rocks.

The jeep was already lodged in a tight space. I was so close to the rock, I had to climb over the back of the jeep to get out. There was something odd attached to the bumper-chains and two very dirty tarps, all ragged and torn.

"Here," Jared said, and led the way to a shadowy crevice just a little shorter than he was. He brushed aside a dusty, dirt-colored tarp and rifled through a pile hiding behind it. He pulled out a T-shirt, soft and clean, with tags still attached. He ripped those off and threw the shirt to me. Then he dug until he found a pair of khaki pants. He checked the size, then flipped them to me, too.

"Put them on."

I hesitated for a moment while he waited, wondering what my problem was. I flushed and then turned my back to him. I yanked my ragged shirt over my head and replaced it as quickly as my fumbling fingers could manage.

I heard him clear his throat. "Oh. I'll, uh, get the car." His footsteps moved away.

I stripped off my tattered cutoff sweats and pulled the crisp new pants into place. My shoes were in bad shape, but they weren't that noticeable. Besides, comfortable shoes weren't always easy to come by. I could pretend I had an attachment to this pair.

Another engine came to life, quieter than the jeep's. I turned to see a modest, unremarkable sedan pull out of a deep shadow under a boulder. Jared got out and chained the tattered tarps from the jeep to this car's rear bumper. Then he drove it to where I stood, and as I saw the heavy tarps wipe the tire tracks from the dirt, I comprehended their purpose.

Jared leaned across the seat to open the passenger door. There was a backpack on the seat. It lay flat, empty. I nodded to myself. Yes, this I needed.

"Let's go."

"Hold on," I said.

I crouched to look at myself in the side mirror.

Not good. I flipped my chin-length hair over my cheek, but it wasn't enough. I touched my cheek and bit my lip.

"Jared. I can't go in with my face like this." I pointed to the long, jagged scar across my skin.

"What?" he demanded.

"No soul would have a scar like this. They would have had it treated. They'll wonder where I've been. They'll ask questions."

His eyes widened and then narrowed. "Maybe you should have thought of this before I snuck you out. If we go back now, they'll think it was a ploy for you to learn the way out."

"We're not going back without medicine for Jamie." My voice was harder than his.

His got harder to match it. "What do you propose we do, then, Wanda?"

"I'll need a rock." I sighed. "You're going to have to hit me."

The Host

CHAPTER 44

Healed

Wanda..."

"We don't have time. I'd do it myself, but I can't get the angle right. There's no other way."

"I don't think I can... do it."

"For Jamie, even?" I pushed the good side of my face as hard as I could against the headrest of the passenger seat and closed my eyes.

Jared was holding the rough fist-sized stone I'd found. He'd been weighing it in his hand for five minutes.

"You just have to get the first few layers of skin off. Just hide the scar, that's all. C'mon, Jared, we have to hurry. Jamie..."

Tell him I said to do it now. And make it a good one.

"Mel says do it now. And make sure you do it hard enough. Get it all the first time."

Silence.

"Do it, Jared!"

He took a deep breath, a gasp. I felt the air move and squeezed my eyes tighter.

It made a squishing sound and a thud-that was the first thing I noticed-and then the shock of the blow wore off, and I felt it, too.

"Ungh," I groaned. I hadn't meant to make any sound. I knew that would make it worse for him. But so much was involuntary with this body. Tears sprang up in my eyes, and I coughed to hide a sob. My head rang, vibrated in aftershock.

"Wanda? Mel? I'm sorry!"

His arms wrapped around us, pulled us into his chest.

"S okay," I whimpered. "We're okay. Did you get it all?"

His hand touched my chin, turned my head.

"Ahh," he gasped, sickened. "I took half your face off. I'm so sorry."

"No, that's good. That's good. Let's go."

"Right." His voice was still weak, but he leaned me back into my seat, settling me carefully, and then the car rumbled beneath us.

Ice-cold air blew in my face, shocking me, stinging my raw cheek. I'd forgotten what air-conditioning felt like.

I opened my eyes. We were driving down a smooth wash-smoother than it should have been, carefully altered to be this way. It snaked away from us, coiling around the brush. I couldn't see very far ahead.

I pulled the visor down and flipped open the mirror. In the shadowy moonlight, my face was black and white. Black all across the right side, oozing down my chin, dripping across my neck, and seeping into the collar of my new, clean shirt.

My stomach heaved.

"Good job," I whispered.

"How much pain are you in?"

"Not much," I lied. "Anyway, it won't hurt much longer. How far are we from Tucson?"

Just then, we reached pavement. Funny how the sight of it made my heart race in panic. Jared stopped, keeping the car hidden in the brush. He got out and removed the tarps and chains from the bumper, putting them in the trunk. He got back in and eased the car forward, checking carefully to make sure the highway was empty. He reached for the headlights.

"Wait," I whispered. I couldn't speak louder. I felt so exposed here. "Let me drive."

He looked at me.

"It can't look like I walked to the hospital like this. Too many questions. I have to drive. You hide in the back and tell me where to go. Is there something you can hide under?"

"Okay," he said slowly. He put the car into reverse and pulled it back into the deeper brush. "Okay. I'll hide. But if you take us somewhere I don't tell you to go..."

Oh! Melanie was stung by his doubt, as was I.

My voice was flat. "Shoot me."

He didn't answer. He got out, leaving the engine running. I slid across the cup holders into his seat. I heard the trunk slam.

Jared climbed into the backseat, a thick plaid blanket under his arm.

"Turn right at the road," he said.

The car was an automatic, but it had been a long time and I was unsure behind the wheel. I moved ahead carefully, pleased to find that I remembered how to drive. The highway was still empty. I pulled out onto the road, my heart reacting to the open space again.

"Lights," Jared said. His voice came from low on the bench.

I searched till I found the switch, then flicked them on. They seemed horribly bright.

We weren't far from Tucson-I could see a yellowish glow of color against the sky. The lights of the city ahead.

"You could drive a little faster."

"I'm right at the limit," I protested.

He paused for a second. "Souls don't speed?"

I laughed. The sound was only a tad hysterical. "We obey all laws, traffic laws included."

The lights became more than a glow-they turned into individual points of brightness. Green signs informed me of my exit options.

"Take Ina Road."

I followed his instructions. He kept his voice low, though, enclosed as we were, we could both have shouted.

It was hard to be in this unfamiliar city. To see houses and apartments and stores with signs lit up. To know I was surrounded, outnumbered. I imagined what it must feel like for Jared. His voice was remarkably calm. But he'd done this before, many times.

Other cars were on the road now. When their lights washed my windshield, I cringed in terror.

Don't fall apart now, Wanda. You have to be strong for Jamie. This won't work if you can't do that.

I can. I can do it.

I concentrated on Jamie, and my hands were steadier on the wheel.

Jared directed me through the mostly sleeping city. The Healing facility was just a small place. It must have been a medical building once-doctors' offices, rather than an actual hospital. The lights were bright through most of the windows, through the glass front. I could see a woman behind a greeting desk. She didn't look up at my headlights. I drove to the darkest corner of the parking lot.

I slid my arms through the straps of the backpack. It wasn't new, but it was in good shape. Perfect. There was just one more thing to do.

"Quick, give me the knife."

"Wanda... I know you love Jamie, but I really don't think you could use it. You're not a fighter."

"Not for them, Jared. I need a wound."

He gasped. "You have a wound. That's enough!"

"I need one like Jamie's. I don't know enough about Healing. I have to see exactly what to do. I would have done it before, but I wasn't sure I'd be able to drive."

"No. Not again."

"Give it to me now. Someone will notice if I don't go inside soon."

Jared thought it through quickly. He was the best, as Jeb had said, because he could see what had to be done and do it fast. I heard the steely sound of the knife coming out of the sheath.

"Be very careful. Not too deep."

"You want to do it?"

He inhaled sharply. "No."

"Okay."

I took the ugly knife. It had a heavy handle and was very sharp; it came to a tapered point at the tip.

I didn't let myself think about it. I didn't want to give myself a chance to be a coward. The arm, not the leg-that's all I paused to decide. My knees were scarred. I didn't want to have to hide that, too.

I held my left arm out; my hand was shaking. I braced it against the door and then twisted my head so that I could bite down on the headrest. I held the knife's handle awkwardly but tightly in my right hand. I pressed the point against the skin of my forearm so I wouldn't miss. Then I closed my eyes.

Jared was breathing too hard. I had to be fast or he would stop me.

Just pretend it's a shovel opening the ground, I told myself.

I jammed the knife into my arm.

The headrest muffled my scream, but it was still too loud. The knife fell from my hand-jerking sickeningly out from the muscle-and then clunked against the floor.

“Wanda!” Jared rasped.

I couldn’t answer yet. I tried to choke back the other screams I felt coming. I’d been right not to do this before driving.

“Let me see!”

“Stay there,” I gasped. “Don’t move.”

I heard the blanket rustling behind me despite my warning. I pulled my left arm against my body and yanked the door open with my right hand. Jared’s hand brushed my back as I half fell out the door. It wasn’t a restraint. It was comfort.

“I’ll be right back,” I coughed out, and then I kicked the door shut behind me.

I stumbled across the lot, fighting nausea and panic. They seemed to balance each other out-one keeping the other from taking control of my body. The pain wasn’t too bad-or rather, I couldn’t feel it as much anymore. I was going into shock. Too many kinds of pain, too close together. Hot liquid rolled down my fingers and dripped to the pavement. I wondered if I could move those fingers. I was afraid to try.

The woman behind the reception desk-middle-aged, with dark chocolate skin and a few silver threads in her black hair-jumped to her feet when I lurched through the automatic doors.

“Oh, no! Oh, dear!” She grabbed a microphone, and her next words echoed from the ceiling, magnified. “Healer Knits! I need you in reception! This is an emergency!”

“No.” I tried to speak calmly, but I swayed in place. “I’m okay. Just an accident.”

She put the microphone down and hurried around to where I stood swaying. Her arm went around my waist.

“Oh, honey, what happened to you?”

“So careless,” I muttered. “I was hiking.... I fell down the rocks. I was... cleaning up after dinner. A knife was in my hand....”

My hesitations seemed like part of the shock to her. She didn’t look at me with suspicion-or humor, the way Ian sometimes did when I lied. Only concern.

“You poor dear! What’s your name?”

“Glass Spires,” I told her, using the rather generic name of a herd member from my time with the Bears.

“Okay, Glass Spires. Here comes the Healer. You’ll be fine in just a moment.”

I didn’t feel panicked at all anymore. The kindly woman patted my back. So gentle, so caring. She would never harm me.

The Healer was a young woman. Her hair, skin, and eyes were all a similar shade of light brown. It made her unusual looking-monochromatic. She wore tan scrubs that only added to that impression.

“Wow,” she said. “I’m Healer Knits Fire. I’ll get you fixed up directly. What happened?”

I told my story again as the two women led me down a hallway and then through the very first door. They had me lie down on the paper-covered bed.

The room was familiar. I’d been in only one place like this, but Melanie’s childhood was full of such memories. The short row of double cabinets, the sink where the Healer was washing her hands, the bright, clean white walls...

“First things first,” Knits Fire said cheerfully. She pulled a cabinet open. I tried to focus my eyes, knowing this was important. The cabinet was full of rows and rows of stacked white cylinders. She took one down, reaching for it without searching; she knew what she wanted. The small container had a label, but I couldn’t read it. “A little no pain should help, don’t you think?”

I saw the label again as she twisted the lid off. Two short words. No Pain? Was that what it said?

“Open your mouth, Glass Spires.”

I obeyed. She took a small, thin square-it looked like tissue paper-and laid it on my tongue. It dissolved at once. There was no flavor. I swallowed automatically.

“Better?” the Healer asked.

And it was. Already. My my head was clear-I could concentrate without difficulty. The pain had melted away with the tiny square. Disappeared. I blinked, shocked.

“Yes.”

“I know you feel fine now, but please don’t move. Your injuries are not treated yet.”

“Of course.”

“Cerulean, could you get us some water? Her mouth seems dry.”

“At once, Healer Knits.”

The older woman left the room.

The Healer turned back to her cabinets, opening a different one this time. This, too, was filled with white containers. “Here we are.” She pulled one from the top of a stack, then took another from the other side.

Almost as if she were trying to help me fulfill my mission, she listed the names as she reached for them.

“Clean-inside and out... Heal... Seal... And where is... ah, Smooth. Don’t want a scar on that pretty face, do we?”

“Ah... no.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be perfect again.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

She leaned over me with another white cylinder. The top of this one came off with a pop, and there was an aerosol spray nozzle underneath. She sprayed my forearm first, coating the wound with clear, odorless mist.

“Healing must be a fulfilling profession.” My voice sounded just right. Interested, but not unduly so. “I haven’t been in a Healing facility since insertion. This is very interesting.”

“Yes, I like it.” She started spraying my face.

“What are you doing now?”

She smiled. I guessed that I was not the first curious soul. “This is Clean. It will make sure nothing foreign stays in the wound. It kills off any of the microbes that might infect the wound.”

“Clean,” I repeated to myself.

“And the Inside Clean, just in case anything has snuck into your system. Inhale this, please.”

She had a different white cylinder in her hand, a thinner bottle with a pump rather than an aerosol top. She puffed a cloud of mist into the air above my face. I sucked in a breath. The mist tasted like mint.

“And this is Heal,” Knits Fire continued, twisting the cap off the next canister, revealing a small pouring spout. “It encourages your tissues to rejoin, to grow the way they should.”

She dribbled a tiny bit of the clear liquid into the wide cut on my arm, then she pushed the edges of the wound together. I could feel her touch, but there was no pain.

“I’ll seal this up before I move on.” She opened another container, this one a pliable tube, and then squeezed out a line of thick, clear jelly onto her finger. “Like glue,” she told me. “It holds everything together and lets the Heal do its job.” She wiped it over my arm in one swift pass. “Okay, you can move that now. Your arm is fine.”

I held it up to look. A faint pink line was visible under the shiny gel. The blood was still wet on my arm, but there was no source anymore. As I watched, the Healer cleaned my skin with one quick pass of a damp towel.

“Turn your face this way, please. Hmm, you must have hit those rocks just exactly wrong. What a mess.”

“Yes. It was a bad fall.”

“Well, thank goodness you were able to drive yourself here.”

She was lightly dripping Heal onto my cheek, smearing it with the tips of her fingers. “Ah, I love to watch it work. Looks much better already. Okay... around the edges.” She smiled to herself. “Maybe one more coat. I want this to be erased.” She worked for a minute longer. “Very nice.”

“Here’s some water,” the older woman said as she came through the door.

“Thank you, Cerulean.”

“Let me know if you need anything more. I’ll be up front.”

“Thanks.”

Cerulean left. I wondered if she was from the Flower Planet. Blue flowers were rare-one might take a name from that.

“You can sit now. How do you feel?”

I pulled myself up. “Perfect.” It was true. I hadn’t felt so healthy in a long time. The sharp shift from pain to ease made the sensation more powerful.

“That’s just how it should be. Okay, let’s dust on a little Smooth.”

She twisted the last cylinder’s top and shook an iridescent powder into her hand. She patted it into my cheek, then patted another handful onto my arm.

“You’ll always have a small line on your arm,” she said apologetically. “Like your neck. A deep wound...” She shrugged. Absentmindedly, she brushed the hair back from my neck and examined the scar.

wound... She shrugged. Absentmindedly, she brushed the hair back from my neck and examined the seal. "This was nicely done. Who was your Healer?"

"Um... Faces Sunward," I said, pulling the name from one of my old students. "I was in... Eureka, Montana. I didn't like the cold. I moved south."

So many lies. I felt a twist of anxiety in my stomach.

"I started out in Maine," she said, not noticing anything amiss in my voice. As she spoke, she cleaned the blood from my neck. "It was too cold for me, too. What's your Calling?"

"Um... I serve food. In a Mexican restaurant in... Phoenix. I like spicy food."

"Me, too." She wasn't looking at me funny. She was wiping my cheek now.

"Very nice. No worries, Glass Spires. Your face looks great."

"Thank you, Healer."

"Of course. Would you like some water?"

"Yes, please." I kept a grip on myself. It wouldn't do to bolt the glass down the way I wanted to. I wasn't able to stop myself from finishing it all, though. It tasted too good.

"Would you like more?"

"I... yes, that would be nice. Thank you."

"I'll be right back."

The second she was out the door, I slid off the mattress. The paper crackled, freezing me in place. She didn't dart back in. I had only seconds. It had taken Cerulean a few minutes to get the water. Maybe it would take the Healer just as long. Maybe the cool, pure water was far away from this room. Maybe.

I ripped the pack off my shoulders and wrenched the drawstrings open. I started with the second cabinet. There was the stacked column of Heal. I grabbed the whole column and let it clatter quietly into the bottom of my pack.

What would I say if she caught me? What lie could I tell?

I took the two kinds of Clean next, from the first cabinet. There was a second stack behind the first of each, and I took half of those, too. Then the No Pain, both stacks of that. I was about to turn back for the Seal, when the label of the next row of cylinders caught my attention.

Cool. For fevers? There were no instructions, just the label. I took the stack. Nothing here would hurt a human body. I was sure of that.

I grabbed all the Seal and two cans of Smooth. I couldn't press my luck any further. I closed the cabinets quietly and threw my arms through the straps of the pack. I leaned against the mattress, making another crackle. I tried to look relaxed.

She didn't come back.

I checked the clock. It had been one minute. How far away was the water?

Two minutes.

Three minutes.

Had my lies been as obvious to her as they were to me?

Sweat started to dew up on my forehead. I wiped it away quickly.

What if she brought back a Seeker?

I thought of the small pill in my pocket, and my hands shook. I could do it, though. For Jamie.

I heard quiet footsteps then, two sets, coming down the hall.

The Host

CHAPTER 45

Succeeded

Healer Knits Fire and Cerulean walked through the door together. The Healer handed me a tall glass of water. It didn't feel as cold as the first—my fingers were cold with fear now. The dark-skinned woman had something for me, too. She handed me a flat rectangle with a handle.

"I thought you would want to see," Knits Fire said with a warm smile.

The tension flooded out of me. There was no suspicion or fear. Just more kindness from the souls who had dedicated their lives to Healing.

Cerulean had given me a mirror

Cerulean had given me a mirror.

I held it up and then tried to stifle my gasp.

My face looked the way I remembered it from San Diego. The face I'd taken for granted there. The skin was smooth and peachy across my right cheekbone. If I looked carefully, it was just a little lighter and pinker in color than the tan on the other cheek.

It was a face that belonged to Wanderer, the soul. It belonged here, in this civilized place where there was no violence and no horror.

I realized why it was so easy to lie to these gentle creatures. Because it felt right to talk with them, because I understood their communication and their rules. The lies could be... maybe should be true. I should be filling a Calling somewhere, whether teaching at a university or serving food in a restaurant. A peaceful, easy life contributing to a greater good.

"What do you think?" the Healer asked.

"I look perfect. Thank you."

"It was my pleasure to heal you."

I looked at myself again, seeing details beyond the perfection. My hair was ragged-dirty, with uneven ends. There was no gloss to it-homemade soap and poor nutrition were to blame for that. Though the Healer had cleaned the blood from my neck, it was still smudged with purple dust.

"I think it's time I called the camping trip quits. I need to clean up," I murmured.

"Do you camp often?"

"In all my free time, lately. I... can't seem to keep away from the desert."

"You must be brave. I find the city much more comfortable."

"Not brave-just different."

In the mirror, my eyes were familiar rings of hazel. Dark gray on the outside, a circle of moss green, and then another circle of caramel brown around the pupil. Underlying it all, a faint shimmer of silver that would reflect the light, magnify it.

Jamie? Mel asked urgently, beginning to feel nervous. I was too comfortable here. She could see the logic of the other path laid out before me, and that frightened her.

I know who I am, I told her.

I blinked, then looked back at the friendly faces beside me.

"Thank you," I said again to the Healer. "I suppose I'd better be on my way."

"It's very late. You could sleep here if you'd like."

"I'm not tired. I feel... perfect."

The Healer grinned. "No Pain does that."

Cerulean walked me to the reception area. She put her hand on my shoulder as I stepped through the door.

My heart beat faster. Had she noticed that my pack, once flat, was now bulging?

"Be more careful, dear," she said, and patted my arm.

"I will. No more hikes in the dark."

She smiled and went back to her desk.

I kept my pace even as I walked through the parking lot. I wanted to run. What if the Healer looked in her cabinets? How soon would she realize why they were half empty?

The car was still there, in the pocket of darkness created by a gap between streetlights. It looked empty. My breath came fast and uneven. Of course it should look empty. That was the whole point. But my lungs didn't calm until I could glimpse the vague shape under the blanket on the backseat.

I opened the door and put the backpack on the passenger seat-it settled there with a reassuring clatter-then I climbed in and shut the door. There was no reason to slam the locks down; I ignored the urge.

"Are you okay?" Jared whispered as soon as the door was closed. His voice was a strained, anxious rasp.

"Shh," I said, keeping my lips as still as I could. "Wait."

I drove past the bright entrance and answered Cerulean's wave with one of my own.

"Making friends?"

We were on the dark road. No one was watching me anymore. I slumped in the seat. My hands started to shake. I could allow that, now that it was over. Now that I'd succeeded.

"All souls are friends," I told him, using my normal volume.

"Are you all right?" he demanded again.

"I'm healed."

"Let me see."

I stretched my left arm across my body, so he could see the tiny pink line.

He sucked in a surprised breath.

The blanket rustled; he sat up and then climbed through the space between the seats. He pushed the backpack out of the way, then pulled it onto his lap, testing its weight.

He looked up at me as we passed under a streetlamp, and he gasped.

“Your face!”

“It’s healed, too. Naturally.”

He raised one hand, holding it in the air near my cheek, unsure. “Does it hurt?”

“Of course not. It feels like nothing happened to it in the first place.”

His fingers brushed the new skin. It tingled, but that was from his touch. Then he was back to business.

“Did they suspect anything? Do you think they’ll call the Seekers?”

“No. I told you they wouldn’t be suspicious. They didn’t even check my eyes. I was hurt, so they healed me.” I shrugged.

“What did you get?” he asked, opening the drawstrings on the backpack.

“The right things for Jamie... if we get back in time...” I glanced at the clock on the dashboard automatically, though the hours it marked were meaningless. “And more for the future. I only took what I understood.”

“We’ll be back in time,” he promised. He examined the white containers. “Smooth?”

“Not a necessity. But I know what it does, so...”

He nodded, digging through the bag. He muttered the names to himself. “No Pain? Does it work?”

I laughed. “It’s amazing. If you stab yourself, I could show you.... That’s a joke.”

“I know.”

He was staring at me with an expression I didn’t understand. His eyes were wide, like something had deeply surprised him.

“What?” My joke hadn’t been that bad.

“You did it.” His tone was full of wonder.

“Wasn’t that the idea?”

“Yes, but... I guess I didn’t really think we were going to make it out.”

“You didn’t? Then why... ? Why did you let me try?”

He answered in a soft almost-whisper. “I figured it was better to die trying than to live without the kid.”

For a moment, my throat was choked with emotion. Mel was too overcome to speak as well. We were a family in that one instant. All of us.

I cleared my throat. No need to feel things that would only come to nothing.

“It was very easy. Probably any of you could get away with it, if you acted naturally. She did look at my neck.” I touched it reflexively. “Your scar is too obviously homemade, but with the medicines I took, Doc could fix that.”

“I doubt any of us could act so natural.”

I nodded. “Yes. It’s easy for me. I know what they expect.” I laughed briefly to myself. “I’m one of them. If you trusted me, I could probably get you anything in the world you wanted.” I laughed again. It was just the stress fading, making me giddy. But it was funny to me. Did he realize that I would do exactly that for him? Anything in the world he wanted.

“I do trust you,” he whispered. “With all our lives, I trust you.”

And he had trusted me with every single human life. His, and Jamie’s, and everyone else’s.

“Thank you,” I whispered back.

“You did it,” he repeated in wonder.

“We’re going to save him.”

Jamie is going to live, Mel rejoiced. Thank you, Wanda.

Anything for them, I told her, and then I sighed, because it was so true.

After reattaching the tarps when we reached the wash, Jared took over the driving. The way was familiar to him, and he drove faster than I would have. He had me get out before he pulled the car into its impossibly small hiding place under the rock slide. I waited for the sound of rock against metal, but Jared found a way in.

And then we were back in the jeep and flying through the night. Jared laughed, triumphant, as we jolted across the open desert, and the wind carried his voice away.

“Where’s the blindfold?” I asked.

“Why?”

I looked at him.

“Wanda, if you wanted to turn us in, you had your chance. No one can deny that you’re one of us now.”

I thought about that. “I think some still could. It would make them feel better.”

“Your some need to get over themselves.”

I was shaking my head now, picturing our reception. “It’s not going to be easy, getting back in. Imagine what they’re thinking right now. What they’re waiting for...”

He didn’t answer. His eyes narrowed.

“Jared... if they... if they don’t listen... if they don’t wait...” I started talking faster, feeling a sudden pressure, trying to get him all the information before it was too late. “Give Jamie the No Pain first-aid that on his tongue. Then the Inside Clean spray-he just has to inhale it. You’ll need Doc to -“

“Hey, hey! You’re going to be the one giving the directions.”

“But let me tell you how -“

“No, Wanda. It’s not going to go down that way. I’ll shoot anyone who touches you.”

“Jared -“

“Don’t panic. I’ll aim low, and then you can use that stuff to heal ‘em back up again.”

“If that’s a joke, it’s not funny.”

“No joke, Wanda.”

“Where’s the blindfold?”

He pressed his lips together.

But I had my old shirt-Jeb’s raggy hand-me-down. That would work almost as well.

“This will make it a little bit easier for them to let us in,” I said as I folded it up into a thick band. “And that means getting to Jamie faster.” I tied it over my eyes.

It was quiet for a time. The jeep bounced along the uneven terrain. I remembered nights like this when Melanie had been the passenger....

“I’m taking us right to the caves. There’s a place the jeep will be fairly well hidden for a day or two. It will save us time.”

I nodded. Time was the key now.

“Almost there,” he said after a minute. He exhaled. “They’re waiting.”

I heard him fumbling beside me, heard a metal clank as he pulled the gun from the backseat.

“Don’t shoot anyone.”

“No promises.”

“Stop!” someone shouted. The sound carried in the empty desert air.

The jeep slowed and then idled.

“It’s just us,” Jared said. “Yes, yes, look. See? I’m still me.”

There was hesitation from the other side.

“Look-I’m bringing the jeep in under cover, okay? We’ve got meds for Jamie, and we’re in a hurry. I don’t care what you’re thinking, you’re not going to get in my way tonight.”

The jeep pulled forward. The sound changed and echoed as he found his cover.

“Okay, Wanda, everything’s fine. Let’s go.”

I already had the pack on my shoulders. I got out of the jeep carefully, not sure where the wall was. Jared caught my searching hands.

“Up you go,” he said, and lifted me over his shoulder again.

I wasn’t as secure as before. He used only one arm to hold me. The other must have had the gun. I didn’t like that.

But I was worried enough to be grateful for it when I heard the running footsteps approaching.

“Jared, you idiot!” Kyle shouted. “What were you thinking?”

“Ease up, Kyle,” Jeb said.

“Is she hurt?” Ian demanded.

“Get out of my way,” Jared said, his voice calm. “I’m in a hurry. Wanda’s in perfect shape, but she insisted on being blindfolded. How is Jamie?”

“Hot,” Jeb said.

“Wanda’s got what we need.” He was moving fast now, sliding downhill.

“I can carry her.” Ian, of course.

“She’s fine where she is.”

“I’m really okay,” I told Ian, my voice bouncing with Jared’s movement.

Uphill again, a steady jog despite my weight. I could hear the others running with us.

I knew when we were through to the main cavern-the angry hiss of voices swelled around us, turning into a clamor of sound.

“Out of my way,” Jared roared over their voices. “Is Doc with Jamie?”

I couldn’t make out the answer. Jared could have put me down, but he was in too much of a hurry to pause for that second.

The angry voices echoed behind us, the sound constricting as we entered the smaller tunnel. I could feel where we were now, follow the turns in my head as we raced through the junction to the third sleeping hall. I could almost count the doors as they passed me invisibly.

Jared jerked to a halt and let the sudden stop slide me down from his shoulder. My feet hit the floor. He ripped the blindfold from my eyes.

Our room was lit by several of the dim blue lanterns. Doc was standing rigidly, as if he’d just sprung to his feet. Kneeling beside him, her hand still holding a wet cloth to Jamie’s forehead, was Sharon. Her face was almost unrecognizable, it was so contorted with fury. Maggie was struggling to her feet on Jamie’s other side.

Jamie still lay limp and red, eyes closed, his chest barely moving to pull in air.

“You!” Sharon spit, and then she launched herself from her crouch. Like a cat, she sprang at Jared, nails reaching for his face.

Jared caught her hands and twisted her away from him, pulling her arms behind her back.

Maggie looked as if she was about to join her daughter, but Jeb stepped around the struggling Sharon and Jared to stand toe-to-toe with her.

“Let her go!” Doc cried.

Jared ignored him. “Wanda-heal him!”

Doc moved to put himself between Jamie and me.

“Doc,” I choked. The violence in the room, swirling around Jamie’s still form, scared me. “I need your help. Please. For Jamie.”

Doc didn’t move, his eyes on Sharon and Jared.

“C’mon, Doc,” Ian said. The little room was too crowded, claustrophobic, as Ian came to stand with his hand on my shoulder. “You gonna let the kid die for your pride?”

“It’s not pride. You don’t know what these foreign substances will do to him!”

“He can’t get much worse, can he?”

“Doc,” I said. “Look at my face.”

Doc wasn’t the only one who responded to my words. Jeb, Ian, and even Maggie looked and then did a double take. Maggie glanced away quickly, angry that she’d betrayed any interest.

“How?” Doc demanded.

“I’ll show you. Please. Jamie doesn’t need to suffer.”

Doc hesitated, staring at my face, and then let out a big sigh. “Ian’s right-he can’t get much worse. If this kills him...” He shrugged, and his shoulders slumped. He took a step back.

“No,” Sharon cried.

No one paid any attention to her.

I knelt beside Jamie, yanking the backpack off my shoulders and tugging it open. I fumbled until I found the No Pain. A bright light switched on beside me, pointed at Jamie’s face.

“Water, Ian?”

I twisted the lid open and pinched out one of the little tissue squares. When I pulled Jamie’s chin down, his skin burned my hand. I laid the square on his tongue and then held out my hand without looking up. Ian placed the bowl of water in it.

Carefully, I dripped enough water into his mouth to wash the medicine down his throat. The sound of his swallow was dry and painful.

I searched frantically for the thinner spray bottle. When I found it, I had the lid off and the mist sprayed into the air above him in one fast movement. I waited, watching his chest until he inhaled.

I touched his face, and it was so hot! I scrambled for the Cool, praying it would be easy to use. The lid screwed off, and I found that the cylinder was full of more tissue squares, light blue this time. I breathed a sigh of relief and placed one on Jamie’s tongue. I picked up the bowl again and dribbled another mouthful of water through his parched lips.

through his patched ups.

His swallow was quicker this time, less strained.

Another hand touched Jamie's face. I recognized Doc's long bony fingers.

"Doc, do you have a sharp knife?"

"I have a scalpel. You want me to open the wound?"

"Yes, so I can clean it."

"I thought about trying that... to drain it, but the pain..."

"He'll feel nothing now."

"Look at his face," Ian leaned in beside me to whisper.

Jamie's face was no longer red. It was a natural, healthy tan. The sweat still glistened on his brow, but I knew it was just left over from before. Doc and I touched his forehead at the same time.

It's working. Yes! Exultation swept through both Mel and me.

"Remarkable," Doc breathed.

"The fever has cooled, but the infection may remain in his leg. Help me with his wound, Doc."

"Sharon, could you hand me -" he began absentmindedly. Then he looked up. "Oh. Ah, Kyle, do you mind handing me that bag right there by your foot?"

I scooted down so that I was over the red, swollen cut. Ian redirected the light so I could see it clearly. Doc and I both rustled through our bags at the same time. He came up with the silver scalpel, a sight that sent a quiver of unease down my spine. I ignored it and readied the bigger Clean spray.

"He won't feel it?" Doc checked, hesitating.

"Hey," Jamie croaked. His eyes were open wide, roaming the room until they found my face. "Hey, Wanda. What's going on? What's everyone doing here?"

The Host

CHAPTER 46

Encircled

Jamie started to sit up.

"Easy there, kid. How you feelin'?" Ian moved to press Jamie's shoulders against the mattress.

"I feel... really good. Why is everyone here? I don't remember..."

"You've been sick. Hold still so we can finish fixing you."

"Can I have some water?"

"Sure, kid. Here you go."

Doc was staring at Jamie with disbelieving eyes.

I could barely talk, my throat was so tight with joy. "It's the No Pain," I muttered. "It feels wonderful."

"Why does Jared have Sharon in a headlock?" Jamie whispered to Ian.

"She's in a bad mood," Ian stage-whispered back.

"Hold very still, Jamie," Doc cautioned. "We're going to... clean out your injury. Okay?"

"Okay," Jamie agreed in a small voice. He'd noticed the scalpel in Doc's hands. He eyed it warily.

"Tell me if you can feel this," Doc said.

"If it hurts," I amended.

With practiced skill, Doc slid the scalpel gently through the diseased skin in one swift movement. We both glanced at Jamie. He was staring straight up at the dark ceiling.

"That feels weird," Jamie said. "But it doesn't hurt."

Doc nodded to himself and brought the scalpel down again, making a cross cut. Red blood and dark yellow discharge oozed from the gash.

As soon as Doc's hand was clear, I was spraying Clean back and forth across the bloody X. When it hit the oozing secretion, the unhealthy yellow seemed to sizzle silently. It began to recede. Almost like suds hit by a spray of water. It melted. Doc was breathing fast beside me.

"Look at that."

I sprayed the area twice for good measure. Already the darker red was gone from Jamie's skin. All that was left was the normal red color of the human blood that flowed out.

"Okay Heal" I muttered. I found the right canister and tinned the little snout over the gashes in his skin.

Gray, then, I finished. I found the right canister and tipped the tube spout over the gashes in his skin. The clear liquid trickled in, coating the raw flesh and glistening there. The bleeding stopped wherever the Heal spread. I poured half the container-surely twice as much as was needed-into the wound.

“Okay, hold the edges together for me, Doc.”

Doc was speechless at this point, though his mouth hung wide. He did as I asked, using two hands to get both cuts.

Jamie laughed. “That tickles.”

Doc’s eyes bulged.

I smeared Seal across the X, watching with deep satisfaction as the edges fused together and faded to pink.

“Can I see?” Jamie asked.

“Let him up, Ian. We’re almost done.”

Jamie pulled himself up on his elbows, his eyes bright and curious. His sweaty, dirty hair was matted to his head. It didn’t make sense now, next to the healthy glow of his skin.

“See, I put this on,” I said, brushing a handful of glitter across the cuts, “and it makes the scar very faint. Like this.” I showed him the one on my arm.

Jamie laughed. “But don’t scars impress girls? Where did you get this stuff, Wanda? It’s like magic.”

“Jared took me on a raid.”

“Seriously? That’s awesome.”

Doc touched the glistening powder residue on my hand, then held his fingers to his nose.

“You should have seen her,” Jared said. “She was incredible.”

I was surprised to hear his voice close behind me. I looked around for Sharon automatically and just caught sight of the flame of her hair leaving the room. Maggie was right behind her.

How sad. How frightening. To be filled with so much hate that you could not even rejoice in the healing of a child... How did anyone ever come to that point?

“She walked right into a hospital, right up to the alien there, and asked them to treat her injuries, bold as anything. Then, when they turned their backs, she robbed them blind!” Jared made it sound exciting. Jamie was enjoying it, too; his smile was huge. “Walked right out of there with medicine enough to last us all for a long time. She even waved at the bugger behind the counter as she drove away.” Jared laughed.

I couldn’t do this for them, Melanie said, suddenly chagrined. You’re of more value to them than I would be.

Hush, I said. It was not a time for sadness or jealousy. Only joy. I wouldn’t be here to help them without you. You saved him, too.

Jamie was staring at me with big eyes.

“It wasn’t that exciting, really,” I told him. He took my hand, and I squeezed his, my heart swollen with gratitude and love. “It was very easy. I’m a bugger, too, after all.”

“I didn’t mean -” Jared started to apologize.

I waved his protest away, smiling.

“How did you explain the scar on your face?” Doc asked. “Didn’t they wonder why you hadn’t -”

“I had to have fresh injuries, of course. I was careful to leave them nothing to be suspicious about. I told them I’d fallen with a knife in my hand.” I nudged Jamie with my elbow. “It could happen to anyone.”

I was really flying high now. Everything seemed to glow from inside-the fabrics, the faces, the very walls. The crowd inside and outside the room had begun to murmur and question, but that noise was just a ringing in my ears-like the lingering sound after a bell is struck. A shimmer in the air. Nothing seemed real but the little circle of people I loved. Jamie and Jared and Ian and Jeb. Even Doc belonged in this perfect moment.

“Fresh injuries?” Ian asked in a flat voice.

I stared at him, surprised at the anger in his eyes.

“It was necessary. I had to hide my scar. And learn how to heal Jamie.”

Jared picked up my left wrist and stroked his finger over the faint pink line a few inches above it. “It was horrible,” he said, all the humor suddenly gone from his sober voice. “She about hacked her hand off. I thought she’d never use it again.”

Jamie’s eyes widened in horror. “You cut yourself?”

I squeezed his hand again. “Don’t be anxious-it wasn’t that bad. I knew it would be healed quickly.”

“You should have seen her,” Jared repeated in a low voice, still stroking my arm.

Ian’s fingers brushed across my cheek. It felt nice, and I leaned into his hand when he left it there. I wondered if it was the No Pain or just the joy of saving Jamie that made everything warm and glowing.

“No more raids for you,” Ian murmured.

“Of course she’ll go out again,” Jared said, his voice louder with surprise. “Ian, she was absolutely phenomenal. You’d have to see to really understand. I’m only just beginning to guess at all the possibilities-“

“Possibilities?” Ian’s hand slid down my neck to my shoulder. He pulled me closer to his side, away from Jared. “At what cost to her? You let her almost hack her own hand off?” His fingers flexed around the top of my arm with his inflections.

The anger didn’t belong with the glow. “No, Ian, it wasn’t like that,” I said. “It was my idea. I had to.”

“Of course it was your idea,” Ian growled. “You’d do anything... You have no limits when it comes to these two. But Jared shouldn’t have let you -“

“What other way was there, Ian?” Jared argued. “Did you have a better plan? Do you think she’d be happier if she was unhurt but Jamie was gone?”

I flinched at the hideous thought.

Ian’s voice was less hostile when he answered. “No. But I don’t understand how you could sit there and watch her do that to herself.” Ian shook his head in disgust, and Jared’s shoulders hunched in response. “What kind of a man -“

“A practical one,” Jeb interrupted.

We all looked up. Jeb stood over us, a bulky cardboard box in his arms.

“It’s why Jared’s the best at getting what we need. Because he can do what has to be done. Or watch what has to be done. Even when watching’s harder than doing.

“Now, I know it’s closer to breakfast than supper, but I figured some of you haven’t eaten in a while,” Jeb went on, changing the subject without subtlety. “Hungry, kid?”

“Uh... I’m not sure,” Jamie admitted. “I feel real hollow, but it doesn’t feel... bad.”

“That’s the No Pain,” I said. “You should eat.”

“And drink,” Doc said. “You need liquids.”

Jeb let the unwieldy box fall onto the mattress. “Thought we might have a bit of a celebration. Dig in.”

“Wow, yum!” Jamie said, pawing through the box of dehydrated meals of the sort that hikers used. “Spaghetti. Excellent.”

“Dibs on the garlic chicken,” Jeb said. “I’ve been missin’ garlic quite a bit-though I imagine no one misses it on my breath.” He chuckled.

Jeb was prepared, with bottles of water and several portable stoves. People began to gather around, squeezing together in the small space. I was wedged between Jared and Ian, and I’d pulled Jamie onto my lap. Though he was much too old for this, he didn’t protest. He must have sensed how much both of us needed that-Mel and I had to feel him alive and healthy and in our arms.

The shimmering circle seemed to widen, enveloping the entire late-night supper party, making them family, too. Everyone waited contentedly for Jeb to prepare the unexpected treats, in no hurry. Fear had been replaced by relief and happy news. Even Kyle, compressed into the small space on the other side of his brother, was not unwelcome in the circle.

Melanie sighed in contentment. She was vibrantly aware of the warmth of the boy in my lap and the touch of the man who still stroked his hand against my arm. She wasn’t even upset by Ian’s arm around my shoulders.

You’re feeling the No Pain, too, I teased her.

I don’t think it’s the No Pain. Not for either of us.

No, you’re right. This is more than I’ve ever had.

This is so much of what I lost.

What was it that made this human love so much more desirable to me than the love of my own kind? Was it because it was exclusive and capricious? The souls offered love and acceptance to all. Did I crave a greater challenge? This love was tricky; it had no hard-and-fast rules-it might be given for free, as with Jamie, or earned through time and hard work, as with Ian, or completely and heartbreakingly unattainable, as with Jared.

Or was it simply better somehow? Because these humans could hate with so much fury, was the other end of the spectrum that they could love with more heart and zeal and fire?

I didn’t know why I had yearned after it so desperately. All I knew was that, now that I had it, it was worth every ounce of risk and agony it had cost. It was better than I’d imagined.

It was everything.

By the time the food was prepared and consumed, the late-or rather early-hour had gotten to us all. People stumbled out of the crowded room toward their beds. As they left, there was more space.

Those remaining slouched down where we were as room became available. Gradually, we melted in place until we were horizontal. My head ended up pillowed on Jared's stomach; his hand stroked my hair now and then. Jamie's face was against my chest, and his arms were around my neck. One of my arms wrapped around his shoulders. Ian's head was cushioned on my stomach, and he held my other hand to his face. I could feel Doc's long leg stretched beside mine, his shoe by my hip. Doc was asleep-I could hear him snoring. I may have even been touching Kyle somewhere.

Jeb was sprawled on the bed. He belched, and Kyle chuckled.

"Nicer night than I was plannin' for. I like it when pessimism goes unrewarded," Jeb mused. "Thanks, Wanda."

"Mmm," I sighed, half asleep.

"Next time she raids..." Kyle said, somewhere on the other side of Jared's body. A big yawn interrupted his sentence. "Next time she raids, I'm coming, too."

"She's not going out again," Ian answered, his body tensing. I brushed my hand against his face, trying to soothe him.

"Of course not," I murmured to him. "I don't have to go anywhere unless I'm needed. I don't mind staying in here."

"I'm not talking about keeping you prisoner, Wanda," Ian explained, irritated. "You can go anywhere you want as far as I'm concerned. Jogging on the highway, if you'd like that. But not a raid. I'm talking about keeping you safe."

"We need her," Jared said, his voice harder than I wanted to hear it.

"We got by fine without her before."

"Fine? Jamie would have died without her. She can get things for us that no one else can."

"She's a person, Jared, not a tool."

"I know that. I didn't say that -"

"S up to Wanda, I'd say," Jeb interrupted the argument just as I was about to. My hand was holding Ian down now, and I could feel Jared's body shifting under my head as he prepared to get up. Jeb's words froze them in place.

"You can't leave it up to her, Jeb," Ian protested.

"Why not? Seems like she's got her own mind. 'S it your job to make decisions for her?"

"I'll tell you why not," Ian grumbled. "Wanda?"

"Yes, Ian?"

"Do you want to go out on raids?"

"If I can help, of course I should go."

"That's not what I asked, Wanda."

I was quiet for a moment, trying to remember his question to see how I'd gotten it wrong.

"See, Jeb? She never takes into account her own wants-her own happiness, her own health, even. She'd do anything we asked her to, even if it got her killed. It's not fair to ask her things the way we'd ask each other. We stop to think about ourselves. She doesn't."

It was quiet. No one answered Ian. The silence dragged on until I felt compelled to speak for myself.

"That's not true," I said. "I think about myself all the time. And I... I want to help. Doesn't that count? It made me so happy to help Jamie tonight. Can't I find happiness the way I want to?"

Ian sighed. "See what I mean?"

"Well, I can't tell her she can't go if she wants to," Jeb said. "She's not a prisoner anymore."

"But we don't have to ask."

Jared was very quiet through all this. Jamie was quiet, too, but I was pretty sure he was asleep. I knew Jared wasn't; his hand was tracing random patterns on the side of my face. Glowing, burning patterns.

"You don't need to ask," I said. "I volunteer. It really wasn't... frightening. Not at all. The other souls are very kind. I'm not afraid of them. It was almost too easy."

"Easy? Cutting your -"

I interrupted Ian quickly. "That was an emergency. I won't have to do that again." I paused for a second. "Right?" I checked.

Ian groaned. "If she goes, I'm going, too," he said in a bleak tone. "Someone has to protect her from herself."

"And I'll be there to protect the rest of us from her," Kyle said with a chuckle. Then he grunted and said,

"Ow."

I was too tired to lift my head to see who had hit Kyle now.

"And I'll be there to bring you all back alive," Jared murmured.

The Host

CHAPTER 47

Employed

This is too easy. It's not really even fun anymore," Kyle complained.

"You wanted to come," Ian reminded him.

He and Ian were in the windowless back of the van, sorting through the nonperishable groceries and toiletries I'd just collected from the store. It was the middle of the day, and the sun was shining on Wichita. It was not as hot as the Arizona desert, but it was more humid. The air swarmed with tiny flying bugs.

Jared drove toward the highway out of town, carefully keeping below the speed limit. This continued to irritate him.

"Getting tired of shopping yet, Wanda?" Ian asked me.

"No. I don't mind it."

"You always say that. Isn't there anything you mind?"

"I mind... being away from Jamie. And I mind being outside, a little bit. During the day especially. It's like the opposite of claustrophobia. Everything is too open. Does that bother you, too?"

"Sometimes. We don't go out during the day much."

"At least she gets to stretch her legs," Kyle muttered. "I don't know why you want to hear her complain."

"Because it's so uncommon. Which makes it a nice change from listening to you complain."

I tuned them out. Once Ian and Kyle got started, they usually went on for a while. I consulted the map.

"Oklahoma City next?" I asked Jared.

"And a few small towns on the way, if you're up for it," he answered, eyes on the road.

"I am."

Jared rarely lost his focus when on a raid. He didn't relax into relieved banter the way Ian and Kyle did every time I completed another mission successfully. It made me smile when they used that word-mission. That sounded so formidable. In reality, it was just a trip to the store. Just like I'd done a hundred times in San Diego when I was only feeding myself.

Like Kyle said, it was too easy to provide any excitement. I pushed my cart up and down the aisles. I smiled at the souls who smiled at me, and I filled my cart with things that would last. I usually grabbed a few things that wouldn't, for the men hiding in the back of the van. Premade sandwiches from the deli-things like that for our meals. And maybe a treat or two. Ian had a fondness for mint chocolate chip ice cream. Kyle liked caramel sweets best. Jared ate anything he was offered; it seemed as if he'd given up favorites many years before, embracing a life where wants were unwelcome and even needs were carefully assessed before they were met. Another reason he was good at this life-he saw priorities uncontaminated by personal desire.

Occasionally, in the smaller towns, someone would notice me, would speak to me. I had my lines down so well that I could probably have fooled a human by this point.

"Hi there. New in town?"

"Yes. Brand-new."

"What brings you to Byers?"

I was always careful to check the map before I left the van, so the town's name would be familiar.

"My partner travels a lot. He's a photographer."

"How wonderful! An Artist. Well, there's certainly a lot of beautiful land around here."

Originally, I'd been the Artist. But I'd found that throwing in the information that I was already partnered saved me some time when I was speaking to males.

"Thank you so much for your help."

"You're very welcome. Come back soon."

I'd only had to speak to a pharmacist once, in Salt Lake City; after that, I'd known what to look for.

A sheepish smile. "I'm not sure I'm getting the right nutrition. I can't seem to avoid the junk food. This body has such a sweet tooth."

body has such a sweet tooth.

"You need to be wise, Thousand Petals. I know it's easy to give in to your cravings, but try to think about what you're eating. In the meantime, you should take a supplement."

Health. Such an obvious title on the bottle, it made me feel silly for asking.

"Would you like the ones that taste like strawberries or the ones that taste like chocolate?"

"Could I try both?"

And the pleasant soul named Earthborn gave me both of the large bottles.

Not very challenging. The only fear or sense of danger I ever felt came when I thought of the small cyanide pill that I always kept in an easily reachable pocket. Just in case.

"You should get new clothes in the next town," Jared said.

"Again?"

"Those are looking a little creased."

"Okay," I agreed. I didn't like the excess, but the steadily growing pile of dirty laundry wouldn't go to waste. Lily and Heidi and Paige were all close to my size, and they would be grateful for something new to wear. The men rarely bothered with things like clothes when they were raiding. Every foray was life-or-death-clothes were not a priority. Nor were the gentle soaps and shampoos that I'd been collecting at every store.

"You should probably clean up, too," Jared said with a sigh. "Guess that means a hotel tonight."

Keeping up appearances was not something they'd worried about before. Of course, I was the only one who had to look as if I were a part of civilization from close up. The men wore jeans and dark T-shirts now, things that didn't show dirt or attract attention in the brief moments they might be seen.

They all hated sleeping in the roadside inns-succumbing to unconsciousness inside the very mouth of the enemy. It scared them more than anything else we did. Ian said he'd rather charge an armed Seeker.

Kyle simply refused. He mostly slept in the van during the day and then sat up at night, acting as sentry.

For me, it was as easy as shopping in the stores. I checked us in, made conversation with the clerk. Told the story about my photographer partner and the friend who was traveling with us (just in case someone saw all three of us enter the room). I used generic names from unremarkable planets. Sometimes we were Bats: Word Keeper, Sings the Egg Song, and Sky Roost. Sometimes we were See Weeds: Twisting Eyes, Sees to the Surface, and Second Sunrise. I changed the names every time, not that anyone was trying to trace our path. It just made Melanie feel safer to do that. All this made her feel like a character in a human movie about espionage.

The hard part, the part I really minded-not that I would say this in front of Kyle, who was so quick to doubt my intentions-was all the taking without giving anything back. It had never bothered me to shop in San Diego. I took what I needed and nothing more. Then I spent my days at the university giving back to the community by sharing my knowledge. Not a taxing Calling, but one I took seriously. I took my turns at the less-appealing chores. I did my day collecting garbage and cleaning streets. We all did.

And now I took so much more and gave nothing in return. It made me feel selfish and wrong.

It's not for yourself. It's for others, Mel reminded me when I brooded.

It still feels wrong. Even you can feel that, can't you?

Don't think about it was her solution.

I was glad we were on the homestretch of our long raid. Tomorrow we would visit our growing cache-a moving truck we kept hidden within a day's reach of our path-and clean out the van for the last time. Just a few more cities, a few more days, down through Oklahoma, then New Mexico, and then a straight drive through Arizona with no stops.

Home again. At last.

When we slept in hotels rather than in the crowded van, we usually checked in after dark and left before dawn to keep the souls from getting a good look at us. Not really necessary.

Jared and Ian were beginning to realize that. This night, because we'd had such a successful day-the van was completely full; Kyle would have little space-and because Ian thought I looked tired, we stopped early. The sun had not set when I returned to the van with the plastic key card.

The little inn was not very busy. We parked close to our room, and Jared and Ian went straight from the van to the room in a matter of five or six steps, their eyes on the ground. On their necks, small, faint pink lines provided camouflage. Jared carried a half-empty suitcase. No one looked at them or me.

Inside, the room-darkening curtains were drawn, and the men relaxed a little bit.

Ian lounged on the bed he and Jared would use, and flipped on the TV. Jared put the suitcase on the table, took out our dinner-cooled greasy breaded chicken strips I'd ordered from the deli in the last store-and passed it around. I sat by the window peering through the corner at the falling sun as I ate.

"You have to admit, Wanda, we humans had better entertainment," Ian teased.

On the television screen, two souls were speaking their lines clearly, their bodies held with perfect posture. It wasn't hard to pick up what was happening in the story because there wasn't a lot of variety in the scripts souls wrote. In this one, two souls were reconnecting after a long separation. The male's stint with the See Weeds had come between them, but he'd chosen to be human because he guessed his partner from the Mists Planet would be drawn to these warm-blooded hosts. And, miracle of miracles, he'd found her here.

They all had happy endings.

"You have to consider the intended audience."

"True. I wish they'd run old human shows again." He flipped through the channels and frowned. "Used to be a few of them on."

"They were too disturbing. They had to be replaced with things that weren't so... violent."

"The Brady Bunch?"

I laughed. I'd seen that show in San Diego, and Melanie knew it from her childhood. "It condoned aggression. I remember one where a little male child punched a bully, and that was portrayed as being the right thing to do. There was blood."

Ian shook his head in disbelief but returned to the show with the former See Weed. He laughed at the wrong parts, the parts that were supposed to be touching.

I stared out the window, watching something much more interesting than the predictable story on television.

Across the two-lane road from the inn was a small park, bordered on one side by a school and on the other by a field where cows grazed. There were a few young trees, and an old-fashioned playground with a sandbox, a slide, a set of monkey bars, and one of those hand-pulled merry-go-rounds. Of course there was a swing set, too, and that was the only equipment being used currently.

A little family was taking advantage of the cooler evening air. The father had some silver in his dark hair at the temples; the mother looked many years his junior. Her red brown hair was pulled back in a long ponytail that bobbed when she moved. They had a little boy, no more than a year old. The father pushed the child in the swing from behind, while the mother stood in front, leaning in to kiss his forehead when he swung her way, making him giggle so hard that his chubby little face was bright red. This had her laughing, too-I could see her body shake with it, her hair dancing.

"What are you staring at, Wanda?"

Jared's question wasn't anxious, because I was smiling softly at the surprising scene.

"Something I've never seen in all my lives. I'm staring at... hope."

Jared came to stand behind me, peeking out over my shoulder. "What do you mean?" His eyes swept across the buildings and the road, not pausing on the playing family.

I caught his chin and pointed his face in the right direction. He didn't so much as flinch at my unexpected touch, and that gave me a strange jolt of warmth in the pit of my stomach. "Look," I said.

"What am I looking at?"

"The only hope for survival I've ever seen for a host species."

"Where?" he demanded, bewildered.

I was aware of Ian close behind us now, listening silently.

"See?" I pointed at the laughing mother. "See how she loves her human child?"

At that moment, the woman snatched her son from the swing and squeezed him in a tight embrace, covering his face with kisses. He cooed and flailed-just a baby. Not the miniature adult he would have been if he carried one of my kind.

Jared gasped. "The baby is human? How? Why? For how long?"

I shrugged. "I've never seen this before-I don't know. She has not given him up for a host. I can't imagine that she would be... forced. Motherhood is all but worshipped among my kind. If she is unwilling..." I shook my head. "I have no idea how that will be handled. This doesn't happen elsewhere. The emotions of these bodies are so much stronger than logic."

I glanced up at Jared and Ian. They were both staring openmouthed at the interspecies family in the park.

"No," I murmured to myself. "No one would force the parents if they wanted the child. And just look at them."

The father had his arms around both the mother and the child now. He looked down at his host body's biological son with staggering tenderness in his eyes.

“Aside from ourselves, this is the first planet we’ve discovered with live births. Yours certainly isn’t the easiest or most prolific system. I wonder if that’s the difference... or if it’s the helplessness of your young. Everywhere else, reproduction is through some form of eggs or seeds. Many parents never even meet their young. I wonder...” I trailed off, my thoughts full of speculation.

The mother lifted her face to her partner, and he kissed her lips. The human child crowed with delight.

“Hmm. Perhaps, someday, some of my kind and some of yours will live in peace. Wouldn’t that be... strange?”

Neither man could tear his eyes from the miracle in front of them.

The family was leaving. The mother dusted the sand off her jeans while the father took the boy. Then, holding hands that they swung between them, the souls strolled toward the apartments with their human child.

Ian swallowed loudly.

We didn’t speak for the rest of the evening, all of us made thoughtful by what we’d seen. We went to sleep early, so we could rise early and get back to work.

I slept alone, in the bed farthest from the door. This made me uncomfortable. The two big men did not fit easily on the other bed; Ian tended to sprawl when he was deeply asleep, and Jared was not above throwing punches when that happened. Both of them would be more comfortable if I shared. I slept in a small ball now; maybe it was the too-open spaces I moved in all day that had me constricting in on myself at night, or maybe I was just so used to curling up to sleep in the tiny space behind the passenger seat on the van’s floor that I’d forgotten how to sleep straight.

But I knew why no one asked me to share. The first night the men had unhappily realized the necessity of a hotel shower for me, I’d heard Ian and Jared talking about me over the whir of the bathroom fan.

“. . . not fair to ask her to choose,” Ian was saying. He kept his voice low, but the fan was not loud enough to drown it out. The hotel room was very small.

“Why not? It’s fairer to tell her where she’s going to sleep? Don’t you think it’s more polite -“

“For someone else. But Wanda will agonize over this. She’ll be trying so hard to please us both, she’ll make herself miserable.”

“Jealous again?”

“Not this time. I just know how she thinks.”

There was a silence. Ian was right. He did know how I thought. He’d probably already foreseen that given the slightest hint that Jared would prefer it, I would choose to sleep beside Jared, and then keep myself awake worrying that I’d made Jared unhappy by being there and that I’d hurt Ian’s feelings in the bargain.

“Fine,” Jared snapped. “But if you try cuddling up to me tonight... so help me, O’Shea.”

Ian chuckled. “Not to sound overly arrogant, but to be perfectly honest, Jared, were I so inclined, I think I could do better.”

Despite feeling a little guilty about wasting so much needed space, I probably did sleep better alone.

We didn’t have to go to a hotel again. The days started to pass more quickly, as if even the seconds were trying to run home. I could feel a strange western pull on my body. We were all eager to get back to our dark, crowded haven.

Even Jared got careless.

It was late, no sunlight left lingering behind the western mountains. Behind us, Ian and Kyle were taking turns driving the big moving truck loaded with our spoils, just as Jared and I took turns with the van. They had to drive the heavy vehicle more carefully than Jared did the van. The headlights had faded slowly into the distance, until they disappeared around a wide curve in the road.

We were on the homestretch. Tucson was behind us. In a few short hours, I would see Jamie. We would unload the welcome provisions, surrounded by smiling faces. A real homecoming.

My first, I realized.

For once the return would bring nothing but joy. We carried no doomed hostages this time.

I wasn’t paying attention to anything but anticipation. The road didn’t seem to be flying by too fast; it couldn’t fly past fast enough as far as I was concerned.

The truck’s headlights reappeared behind us.

“Kyle must be driving,” I murmured. “They’re catching up.”

And then the red and blue lights suddenly spun out in the dark night behind us. They reflected off all the mirrors, dancing spots of color across the roof, the seats, our frozen faces, and the dashboard, where the needle on the speed gauge showed that we were traveling twenty miles over the speed limit.

The sound of a siren pierced the desert calm.

The Host

CHAPTER 48

Detained

The red and blue lights swirled in time with the siren's cry.

Before the souls had come to this place, these lights and sounds had had only one meaning. The law, the keepers of the peace, the punishers of offenders.

Now, again, the flashing colors and angry noise had only one meaning. A very similar meaning. Still the keepers of the peace. Still the punishers.

Seekers.

It wasn't as common a sight or sound as it had been before. The police force was only needed to help in cases of accidents or other emergencies, not to enforce laws. Most civil servants didn't have vehicles with sirens, unless the vehicle was an ambulance or a fire truck.

This low, sleek car behind us was not for any accident. This was a vehicle made for pursuit. I'd never seen anything quite like it before, but I knew exactly what it meant.

Jared was frozen, his foot still pushing down on the gas pedal. I could see that he was trying to find a solution, a way to outrun them in this decrepit van or a way to evade them-to hide our wide white profile in the low, gaunt brush of the desert-without leading them back to the rest. Without giving everyone away. We were so close to the others now. They slumbered, unaware...

When he gave up after two seconds of frantic thought, he exhaled.

"I'm so sorry, Wanda," he whispered. "I blew it."

"Jared?"

He reached for my hand and eased up on the gas. The car started to slow.

"Got your pill?" he choked.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Can Mel hear me?"

Yes. The thought was a sob.

"Yes." My voice only barely escaped being a sob, too.

"I love you, Mel. Sorry."

"She loves you. More than anything."

A short, aching silence.

"Wanda, I... I care about you, too. You're a good person, Wanda. You deserve better than what I've given you. Better than this."

He had something small, much too small to be so deadly, between his fingers.

"Wait," I gasped.

He could not die.

"Wanda, we can't take the chance. We can't outrun them, not in this. If we try to run, a thousand of them will swarm after us. Think of Jamie."

The van was slowing, drifting to the shoulder.

"Give me one try," I begged. I fumbled quickly for the pill in my pocket. I pinched it between my thumb and forefinger and held it up. "Let me try to lie us out of this. I'll swallow it right away if anything goes wrong."

"You'll never lie your way past a Seeker!"

"Let me try. Quick!" I pulled off my seat belt and crouched beside him, unfastening his. "Switch with me. Fast, before they're close enough to see."

"Wanda -"

"One try. Hurry!"

He was the best at split-second decisions. Smooth and fast, he was out of the driver's seat and over my crouched body. I rolled up into his seat while he took mine.

"Seat belt," I ordered tersely. "Close your eyes. Turn your head away."

He did as I said. It was too dark to see it, but his new soft pink scar would be visible from this angle.

I strapped my seat belt on and then leaned my head back.

Lying with my body, that was the key. It was simply a matter of the right movements. Imitation. Like the actors on the TV program, only better. Like a human.

“Help me, Mel,” I murmured.

I can’t help you be a better soul, Wanda. But you can do this. Save him. I know you can.

A better soul. I only had to be myself.

It was late. I was tired. I wouldn’t have to act that part.

I let my eyelids droop, let my body sag against the seat.

Chagrin. I could do chagrin. I could feel it now.

My mouth turned down into a sheepish grimace.

The Seekers’ car did not park behind us, the way I could feel Mel expected. It stopped across the road, on the shoulder, facing the wrong way for that lane’s traffic flow. A dazzling light exploded through the window of the other car. I blinked into it, raising my hand to shade my face with deliberate slowness. Faintly, past the glare of the spotlight, I saw the gleam of my eyes bounce against the road as I looked down.

A car door slammed. One set of footsteps made a pattern of low thuds as someone crossed the pavement. There was no sound of dirt or rocks, so the Seeker had emerged from the passenger side. Two of them, at least, but only one coming to interrogate me. This was a good sign, a sign of comfort and confidence.

My glowing eyes were a talisman. A compass that could not fail-like the North Star, undoubtable.

Lying with my body was not the key. Telling the truth with it was enough. I had something in common with the human baby in the park: nothing like me had ever existed before.

The Seeker’s body blocked the light, and I could see again.

It was a man. Probably middle-aged-his features conflicted with one another, making it hard to tell; his hair was all white, but his face was smooth and unwrinkled. He wore a T-shirt and shorts, a blocky gun clearly visible on his hip. One hand rested on the butt of the weapon. In his other hand was a dark flashlight. He didn’t turn it on.

“Having a problem, miss?” he said when he was a few feet away. “You were going much too fast for safety.”

His eyes were restless. They swiftly appraised my expression-which was, hopefully, sleepy-and then ran along the length of the van, darted into the darkness behind us, flashed forward to the stretch of highway ahead, lit by our headlights, and came back to my face. They repeated the course another time.

He was anxious. This knowledge made my palms sweaty, but I tried to keep the panic from my voice.

“I’m so sorry,” I apologized in a loud whisper. I glanced at Jared, as if checking to see whether our words had woken him. “I think... well, I think I might have fallen asleep. I didn’t realize I was so tired.”

I tried to smile remorsefully. I could tell I sounded stiff, like the too-careful actors on the television.

The Seeker’s eyes traced their route again, this time lingering on Jared. My heart jumped painfully against the inside of my ribs. I pinched the pill tighter.

“It was irresponsible for me to drive for so long without sleep,” I said quickly, trying again to smile a little. “I thought we could make it to Phoenix before I would need rest. I’m very sorry.”

“What’s your name, miss?”

His voice was not harsh, but neither was it warm. He kept it low, though, following my cue.

“Leaves Above,” I said, using the name from the last hotel. Would he want to check my story? I might need someplace to refer him to.

“Upside-down Flower?” he guessed. His eyes flickered around their course.

“Yes, I was.”

“My partner, too. Were you on the island?”

“No,” I said quickly. “The mainland. Between the great rivers.”

He nodded, perhaps a little disappointed.

“Should I go back to Tucson?” I asked. “I think I’m quite awake now. Or maybe I should take a nap right here first -“

“No!” he interrupted me in a louder voice.

I jumped, startled, and the little pill slipped from my fingers. It dropped to the metal floor with a faintly audible clink. I felt the blood drain from my face as though a plug had been pulled.

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” he apologized quickly, his eyes repeating their restless circle. “But you shouldn’t linger here.”

“Why?” I managed to whisper. My fingers twitched anxiously at the empty air.

why! I managed to whisper. My fingers twitched anxiously at the empty air.

“There was a... disappearance recently.”

“I don’t understand. A disappearance?”

“It could have been an accident... but there might be...” He hesitated, unwilling to say the word. “Humans may be in this area.”

“Humans?” I squeaked, too loud. He heard the fear in my voice and interpreted it the only way he could.

“There’s no proof of that, Leaves Above. No sightings or anything. Don’t be anxious. But you should proceed on to Phoenix without unnecessary delay.”

“Of course. Or maybe Tucson? That would be closer.”

“There’s no danger. You can continue with your plans.”

“If you’re sure, Seeker...”

“I’m quite sure. Just don’t go wandering off into the desert, Flower.” He smiled. The expression warmed his face, making it kind. Just like all the other souls I’d dealt with. He wasn’t anxious about me, but for me. He wasn’t listening for lies. And he probably wouldn’t recognize them if he was. Just another soul.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” I smiled back at him. “I’ll be more careful. I know I couldn’t fall asleep now.” I glanced at the desert out Jared’s window with a wary expression, so the Seeker would think that fear was making me alert. My expression tensed into a taut mask as I caught sight of a pair of lights reflected in the side mirror.

Jared’s spine stiffened at the same time, but he held his pose. It looked too tight.

My eyes darted back to the Seeker’s face.

“I can help with that,” he said, still smiling but looking down now as he fumbled to remove something from his pocket.

He hadn’t seen the change in my face. I tried to control the muscles in my cheeks, to make them relax, but I couldn’t concentrate hard enough to make it happen.

In the rearview mirror, the headlights got closer.

“You should not use this often,” the Seeker went on, searching the other pocket now. “It’s not harmful, of course, or the Healers wouldn’t have us give it out. But if you use it frequently, it will alter your sleep cycles... Ah, here it is. Awake.”

The lights slowed as they approached.

Just drive by, I begged in my head. Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop.

Let it be Kyle at the wheel, Melanie added, thinking the words like a prayer.

Don’t stop. Just drive. Don’t stop. Just drive.

“Miss?”

I blinked, trying to focus. “Um, Awake?”

“Just inhale this, Leaves Above.”

He had a thin white aerosol can in his hand. He sprayed a puff of mist into the air in front of my face. I leaned forward obediently and took a sniff, my eyes darting to the mirror at the same time.

“It’s grapefruit scented,” the Seeker said. “Nice, don’t you think?”

“Very nice.” My brain was suddenly sharp, focused.

The big moving truck slowed and then idled on the road behind us.

No! Mel and I shouted together. I searched the dark floor for one half second, hoping against hope that the little pill would be visible. I couldn’t even make out my feet.

The Seeker glanced absently at the truck and then waved it forward.

I looked back at the truck, too, a forced smile on my face. I couldn’t see who was driving. My eyes reflected the headlights, shot out faint beams of their own.

The truck hesitated.

The Seeker waved again, more broadly this time. “Go ahead,” he muttered to himself.

Drive! Drive! Drive!

Beside me, Jared’s hand was clenched in a fist.

Slowly, the big truck shuddered into first gear and then inched forward through the space between the Seeker’s vehicle and ours. The Seeker’s spotlight outlined two silhouettes, two black profiles, both facing straight forward. The one in the driver’s seat had a crooked nose.

Mel and I both exhaled in relief.

“How do you feel?”

“Alert.” I told the Seeker.

"It will wear off in about four hours."

"Thank you."

The Seeker chuckled. "Thank you, Leaves Above. When we saw you racing down the road, we thought we might have humans on our hands. I was sweating, but not from the heat!"

I shuddered.

"Don't worry. You'll be perfectly fine. If you'd like, we can follow you to Phoenix."

"I'm just fine. You don't need to trouble yourself."

"It was nice to meet you. I'll be pleased when my shift is over, so that I can go home and tell my partner I met another green-first Flower. She'll be so excited."

"Um... tell her, 'Brightest sun, longest day' for me," I said, giving him the Earthly translation of the common greeting and farewell on the Flower Planet.

"Certainly. Have a pleasant journey."

"And you have a pleasant night."

He stepped back, and the spotlight hit my eyes again. I blinked furiously.

"Cut it, Hank," the Seeker said, shading his eyes as he turned to walk toward the car. The night turned black again, and I forced another smile toward the invisible Seeker named Hank.

I started the engine with shaking hands.

The Seekers were faster. The little black car with the incongruous light bar atop it purred to life. It executed a sharp U-turn, and then the taillights were all I could see. They disappeared quickly into the night.

I pulled back onto the road. My heart pumped the blood through my veins in hard little bursts. I could feel the fierce pulse throbbing through to my fingertips.

"They're gone," I whispered through my suddenly chattering teeth.

I heard Jared swallow.

"That was... close," he said.

"I thought Kyle was going to stop."

"Me, too."

Neither of us could speak above a whisper.

"The Seeker bought it." His teeth were still clenched in anxiety.

"Yes."

"I wouldn't have. Your acting hasn't improved much."

I shrugged. My body was so rigid, it all moved together. "They can't not believe me. What I am... well, it's something impossible. Something that shouldn't exist."

"Something unbelievable," he agreed. "Something wonderful."

His praise thawed some of the ice in my stomach, in my veins.

"Seekers aren't all that different from the rest of them," I murmured to myself. "Nothing to be especially afraid of."

He shook his head back and forth slowly. "There really isn't anything you can't do, is there?"

I wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"Having you with us is going to change everything," he continued under his breath, talking to himself now.

I could feel how his words made Melanie sad, but she was not angry this time. She was resigned.

You can help them. You can protect them better than I could. She sighed.

The slow-moving taillights did not frighten me when they appeared on the road ahead. They were familiar, a relief. I sped up-just a little, still a few miles below the limit-to pass them.

Jared pulled a flashlight out of the glove compartment. I understood what he was doing: reassurance.

He held the light to his own eyes as we passed the cab of the truck. I looked past him, through the other window. Kyle nodded once at Jared and took a deep breath. Ian was leaning anxiously around him, his eyes focused on me. I waved once, and he grimaced.

We were getting close to our hidden exit.

"Should I go all the way to Phoenix?"

Jared thought about it. "No. They might see us on the way back and stop us again. I don't think they're following. They're focused on the road."

"No, they won't follow." I was sure of this.

"Let's go home, then."

"Home," I agreed wholeheartedly.

We killed the lights, and so did Kyle behind us.

We would take both vehicles right to the caves and unload quickly so they could be hidden before morning. The little overhang by the entrance would not hide them from view.

I rolled my eyes as I thought of the way into and out of the caves. The big mystery I hadn't been able to solve for myself. Jeb was so tricky.

Tricky-just like the directions he'd given Mel, the lines he'd carved onto the back of her photo album. They didn't lead to his cave hideout at all. No, instead they made the person following them parade back and forth in front of his secret place, giving him ample opportunity to decide whether or not to extend an invitation inside.

"What do you think happened?" Jared asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

"The recent disappearance the Seeker mentioned."

I stared ahead blankly. "Wouldn't that be me?"

"I don't think you would count as recent, Wanda. Besides, they weren't watching the freeway before we left. That's new. They're looking for us. Here."

His eyes narrowed, while mine widened.

"What have they been doing?" Jared suddenly exploded, slapping his hand loudly against the dashboard. I jumped.

"You think Jeb and the others did something?"

He didn't answer me; he just stared out across the star-bright desert with furious eyes.

I didn't understand. Why would the Seekers be looking for humans just because someone had disappeared in the desert? Accidents did happen. Why would they jump to that particular conclusion?

And why was Jared angry? Our family in the caves wouldn't do anything to draw attention to themselves. They knew better than that. They wouldn't go outside unless there was an emergency of some kind.

Or something they felt was urgent. Necessary.

Had Doc and Jeb been taking advantage of my absence?

Jeb had only agreed to stop slaughtering people and souls while I was under the same roof. Was this their compromise?

"You okay?" Jared asked.

My throat was too thick to answer. I shook my head. Tears streamed down my cheeks and fell from my chin to my lap.

"Maybe I'd better drive."

I shook my head again. I could see well enough.

He didn't argue with me.

I was still crying silently when we got to the little mountain that hid our vast cave system. It was actually just a hill-an insignificant outcropping of volcanic rock, like so many others, sparsely decorated with spindly creosote and flat-bladed prickly pears. The thousands of tiny vents were invisible, lost in the jumble of loose purple rocks. Somewhere, smoke would be rising, black on black.

I got out of the van and leaned against the door, wiping my eyes. Jared came to stand beside me. He hesitated, then put a hand on my shoulder.

"Sorry. I didn't know they were planning this. I had no idea. They shouldn't have..."

But he only thought that because they'd somehow gotten caught.

The moving truck rumbled to a stop behind us. Two doors slammed shut, and then feet were running toward us.

"What happened?" Kyle demanded, there first.

Ian was right behind him. He took one look at my expression, at the tears still running down my cheeks, at Jared's hand on my shoulder, and then rushed forward and threw his arms around me. He pulled me into his chest. I didn't know why this made me cry harder. I clung to him while my tears leaked onto his shirt.

"It's okay. You did great. It's over."

"Seeker's not the problem, Ian," Jared said, voice strained, his hand still touching me, though he had to lean forward to preserve that point of contact.

"Huh?"

"They were watching the road for a reason. Sounds like Doc's been... working in our absence."

I shuddered, and for a moment, it seemed like I could taste silver blood in the back of my throat.

"Why, those -!" Ian's fury robbed him of speech. He couldn't finish his sentence.

“Nice,” Kyle said in a disgusted tone. “Idiots. We’re gone for a few weeks, and they’ve got the Seekers on patrol. They could have just asked us to -“

“Shut up, Kyle,” Jared said harshly. “That’s neither here nor there at the moment. We’ve got to get this all unloaded fast. Who knows how many are watching for us? Let’s grab a load and then get some more hands.”

I shook Ian off so that I could help. The tears did not stop running. Ian stayed close to my side, taking the heavy flat of canned soup I picked up and replacing it with a big but light box of pasta.

We started down the steep pathway in, Jared leading. The utter blackness did not bother me. I still didn’t know this path well, but it wasn’t difficult. Straight down, then straight up.

We were halfway there when a familiar voice called out from a distance. It echoed down the tunnel, fracturing.

“They’re back... ack... back!” Jamie was shouting.

I tried to dry my tears on my shoulder, but I couldn’t get them all.

A blue light approached, bouncing as the carrier ran. Then Jamie bounded into view.

His face threw me.

I was trying to compose myself to greet him, assuming he would be joyful and not wanting to upset him. But Jamie was already upset. His face was white and tense, his eyes rimmed in red. His dirty cheeks had rivulets through the dust there, tracks made by tears.

“Jamie?” Jared and I said together, dropping our boxes to the floor.

Jamie ran straight for me and threw his arms around my waist.

“Oh, Wanda! Oh, Jared!” he sobbed. “Wes is dead! He’s dead! The Seeker killed him!”

The Host

CHAPTER 49

Interrogated

I killed Wes.

My hands, scratched and bruised and painted with purple dust in the course of the frantic unloading, might as well have been painted red with his blood.

Wes was dead, and it was as much my fault as if I’d pulled the trigger myself.

All of us but five were gathered in the kitchen now that the truck was unloaded, eating some of the perishables we’d picked up on the final shopping trip—cheese and fresh bread with milk—and listening to Jeb and Doc as they explained everything to Jared, Ian, and Kyle.

I sat a little space away from the others, my head in my hands, too numb with grief and guilt to ask questions the way they did. Jamie sat with me. He patted my back now and then.

Wes was already buried in the dark grotto beside Walter. He had died four days ago, the night that Jared and Ian and I had sat watching the family in the park. I would never see my friend again, never hear his voice...

Tears splashed on the stone beneath me, and Jamie’s pats increased in tempo.

Andy and Paige were not here.

They’d driven the truck and the van back to their hiding places. They would take the jeep from there to its usual rough garage, and then they’d have to walk the rest of the way home. They would be back before sunrise.

Lily was not here.

“She’s not... doing so well,” Jamie had murmured when he’d caught me scanning the room for her. I didn’t want to know any more. I could imagine well enough.

Aaron and Brandt were not here.

Brandt now bore a smooth, pink, circular scar in the hollow space beneath his left collarbone. The bullet had missed his heart and lungs by a hair and then burrowed halfway through his shoulder blade trying to escape. Doc had used most of the Heal getting it out of him. Brandt was fine now.

Wes’s bullet had been better aimed. It had pierced his high olive-skinned forehead and blown out the back of his head. There was nothing Doc could have done, even if he’d been right there with them, a gallon of Heal at his disposal.

Brandt, who now carried in a holster on his hip a boxy, heavy trophy from the encounter, was with Aaron. They were in the tunnel where we would have stored our spoils if it had not been occupied. If it was not being

use as a prison again.

As if losing Wes was not enough.

It seemed hideously wrong to me that the numbers remained the same. Thirty-five living bodies, just like before I'd come to the caves. Wes and Walter were gone, but I was here.

And now so was the Seeker.

My Seeker.

If I'd just gone straight to Tucson. If I had just stayed in San Diego. If I had just skipped this planet and gone somewhere entirely different. If I'd given myself as a Mother like anyone else would have after five or six planets. If, if, if... If I had not come here, if I had not given the Seeker the clues she needed to follow, then Wes would be alive. It had taken her longer than me to figure them out, but when she did, she didn't have to pursue them with caution. She'd barreled through the desert in an all-terrain SUV, leaving bright new scars across the fragile desert landscape, each pass getting closer.

They had to do something. They had to stop her.

I had killed Wes.

They still would have caught me in the first place, Wanda. I led them here, not you.

I was too miserable to answer her.

Besides, if we hadn't come here, Jamie would be dead. And maybe Jared, too. He would have died tonight, without you.

Death on every side. Death everywhere I looked.

Why did she have to follow me? I moaned to myself. I'm not hurting the other souls here, not really. I'm even saving some of their lives by being here, by keeping Doc from his doomed efforts. Why did she have to follow?

Why did they keep her? Mel snarled. Why didn't they kill her right away? Or kill her slow-I don't care how! Why is she still alive?

Fear fluttered in my stomach. The Seeker was alive; the Seeker was here.

I shouldn't have been afraid of her.

Of course, it made sense to be afraid that her disappearance would bring the other Seekers down on us. Everyone was afraid of that. Spying on the search for my body, the humans had seen how vocal she was about her convictions. She'd been trying to convince the other Seekers that there were humans hiding in this desert wasteland. None seemed to take her seriously. They had gone home; she was the only one who kept looking.

But now she'd vanished in the middle of her search. That changed everything.

Her vehicle had been moved far away, left in the desert on the other side of Tucson. It looked as though she'd disappeared in the same way it was believed I had: pieces of her bag left torn nearby, the snacks she'd carried with her chewed open and scattered. Would the other souls accept such a coincidence?

We already knew they would not. Not entirely. They were looking. Would the search become more intense?

But to be afraid of the Seeker herself... That didn't make much sense. She was physically insignificant, probably smaller than Jamie. I was stronger and faster than she was. I was surrounded by friends and allies, and she, inside these caves at least, was all alone. Two guns, the rifle and her own Glock-the very gun Ian had once envied, the gun that had killed my friend Wes-were trained on her at every moment. Only one thing had kept her alive until now, and it couldn't save her for long.

Jeb had thought I might want to talk to her. That was all.

Now that I was back, she was condemned to die within hours whether I spoke to her or not.

So why did I feel as though I was at the disadvantage? Why this strange premonition that she would be the one to walk away from our confrontation?

I hadn't decided if I wanted to talk to her. At least, that was what I'd told Jeb.

Without a doubt, I did not want to talk to her. I was terrified to ever see her face again-a face that, no matter how I tried, I could not imagine looking frightened.

But if I told them I had no desire for conversation, Aaron would shoot her. It would be like I'd given him the order to fire. Like I'd pulled the trigger.

Or worse, Doc would try to cut her out of the human body. I flinched away from the memory of the silver blood smeared all over the hands of my friend.

Melanie twisted uneasily, trying to escape the torment in my head.

Wanda? They're just going to shoot her. Don't panic.

Should this comfort me? I couldn't avoid the imagined tableau: Aaron, the Seeker's gun in his hand, the

Seeker's body slowly crumpling to the stone floor, the red blood pooling around her...

You don't have to watch.

That wouldn't stop it from happening.

Melanie's thoughts became a little frantic. But we want her to die. Right? She killed Wes! Besides, she can't stay alive. No matter what.

She was right about everything, of course. It was true that there was no way the Seeker could stay alive. Imprisoned, she would work doggedly to escape. Freed, she would quickly be the death of all my family.

It was true she had killed Wes. He was so young and so loved. His death left a burning agony in its wake. I understood the claim of human justice that demanded her life in return.

It was also true that I wanted her to die.

"Wanda? Wanda?"

Jamie shook my arm. It took me a moment to realize that someone had called my name. Perhaps many times already.

"Wanda?" Jeb's voice asked again.

I looked up. He was standing over me. His face was expressionless, the blank facade that meant he was in the grip of some strong emotion. His poker face.

"The boys want to know if you have any questions for the Seeker."

I put one hand to my forehead, trying to block the images there. "If I don't?"

"They're ready to be done with guard duty. It's a hard time. They'd rather be with their friends right now."

I nodded. "Okay. I guess I'd better... go and see her at once, then." I shoved myself away from the wall and to my feet. My hands were shaking, so I clenched them into fists.

You don't have any questions.

I'll think of some.

Why prolong the inevitable?

I have no idea.

You're trying to save her, Melanie accused, full of outrage.

There's no way to do that.

No. There isn't. And you want her dead anyway. So let them shoot her.

I cringed.

"You okay?" Jamie asked.

I nodded, not trusting my voice enough to speak.

"You don't have to," Jeb told me, his eyes sharp on my face.

"It's okay," I whispered.

Jamie's hand wrapped around mine, but I shook it off. "Stay here, Jamie."

"I'll come with you."

My voice was stronger now. "Oh, no, you will not."

We stared at each other for a moment, and for once I won the argument. He stuck his chin out stubbornly but slouched back against the wall.

Ian, too, seemed inclined to follow me out of the kitchen, but I stopped him in his tracks with a single look. Jared watched me go with an unfathomable expression.

"She's a complainer," Jeb told me in a low voice as we walked back toward the hole. "Not quiet like you were. Always asking for more-food, water, pillows... She threatens a lot, too. 'The Seekers will get you all!' That kinda thing. It's been hard on Brandt especially. She's pushed his temper right to the edge."

I nodded. This did not surprise me one bit.

"She hasn't tried to escape, though. A lot of talk and no action. Once the guns come up, she backs right down."

I recoiled.

"My guess is, she wants to live pretty dang bad," Jeb murmured to himself.

"Are you sure this is the... safest place to keep her?" I asked as we started down the black, twisting tunnel.

Jeb chuckled. "You didn't find your way out," he reminded me. "Sometimes the best hiding place is the one that's in plain sight."

My answer was flat. "She's more motivated than I was."

"The boys're keepin' a sharp eye on her. Nothin' to worry about."

We were almost there. The tunnel turned back on itself in a sharp V.

How many times had I rounded this corner, my hand tracing along the inside of the pointed switchback, just like this? I'd never traced along the outside wall. It was uneven, with jutting rocks that would leave bruises and cause me to trip. Staying on the inside was a shorter walk anyway.

When they'd first showed me that the V was not a V but a Y-two branches forking off from another tunnel, the tunnel-I'd felt pretty stupid. Like Jeb said, hiding things in plain sight was sometimes the cleverest route. The times I'd been desperate enough to even consider escaping the caves, my mind had skipped right over this place in my speculations. This was the hole, the prison. In my head, it was the darkest, deepest well in the caves. This was where they'd buried me.

Even Mel, sneakier than I was, had never dreamed that they'd held me captive just a few paces from the exit.

It wasn't even the only exit. But the other was small and tight, a crawl space. I hadn't found that one because I'd walked into these caves standing upright. I hadn't been looking for that kind of tunnel. Besides, I'd never explored the edges of Doc's hospital; I'd avoided it from the beginning.

The voice, familiar even though it seemed part of another life, interrupted my thoughts.

"I wonder how you're still alive, eating like this. Ugh!"

Something plastic clattered against the rocks.

I could see the blue light as we rounded the last corner.

"I didn't know humans had the patience to starve someone to death. That seems like too complex a plan for you shortsighted creatures to grasp."

Jeb chuckled. "Gotta say, I'm impressed with those boys. Surprised they held up this long."

We turned into the lit dead-end tunnel. Brandt and Aaron, both sitting as far as possible from the end of the tunnel where the Seeker paced, both with guns in their hands, sighed with relief when they saw us approaching.

"Finally," Brandt muttered. His face was etched in hard lines of grief.

The Seeker halted in her pacing.

I was surprised to see the conditions she was kept in.

She was not stuffed into the tiny cramped hole, but comparatively free, stomping to and fro across the short width of the tunnel. On the floor, against the flat end of the tunnel, were a mat and a pillow. A plastic tray was tilted at an angle against the wall at about the midpoint of the cave; a few jicama roots lay scattered near it with a soup bowl. A little soup was splattered out from where that lay. This explained the clatter I'd just heard-she'd thrown her food. It looked as though she'd eaten most of it first, though.

I stared at this relatively humane setup and felt an odd pain in my stomach.

Who did we kill? Melanie muttered sullenly. This stung her, too.

"You want a minute with her?" Brandt asked me, and the pain stabbed again. Had Brandt ever referred to me using a feminine pronoun? I wasn't surprised that Jeb had done this for the Seeker, but everyone else?

"Yes," I whispered.

"Careful," Aaron cautioned. "She's an angry little thing."

I nodded.

The others stayed where they were. I walked down the tunnel alone.

It was hard to lift my eyes, to meet the gaze that I could feel like cold fingers pressing against my face.

The Seeker was glaring at me, a harsh sneer twisting her features. I'd never seen a soul use that expression before.

"Well, hello there, Melanie," she mocked me. "What took you so long to come visit?"

I didn't answer. I walked toward her slowly, trying hard to believe that the hate coursing through my body really did not belong to me.

"Did your little friends think I would talk to you? Spill all my secrets because you carry a gagged and lobotomized soul around in your head, reflecting through your eyes?" She laughed abrasively.

I stopped two long strides away from her, my body tensed to run. She made no aggressive move toward me, but I could not relax my muscles. This was not like meeting the Seeker on the highway-I didn't have the usual sensation of safety that I felt around the gentle others of my kind. Again, the strange conviction that she would live long after I was gone swept through me.

Don't be ridiculous. Ask her your questions. Have you come up with any?

"So, what do you want? Did you request permission to kill me personally, Melanie?" the Seeker hissed.

"They call me Wanda here," I said.

She flinched slightly when I opened my lips to speak, as if expecting me to shout. My low, even voice

seemed to upset her more than the scream she anticipated.

I examined her face while she glared at me with her bulging eyes. It was dirty, stained with purple dust and dried sweat. Other than that, there wasn't a mark on it. Again, this gave me an odd ache.

"Wanda," she repeated in a flat voice. "Well, what are you waiting for? Didn't they give you the okay? Were you planning to use your bare hands or my gun?"

"I'm not here to kill you."

She smiled sourly. "To interrogate me, then? Where are your instruments of torture, human?"

I cringed. "I won't hurt you."

Insecurity flickered across her face and then vanished behind her sneer. "What are they keeping me for, then? Do they think I can be tamed, like your pet soul?"

"No. They just... they didn't want to kill you until they had... consulted me. In case I wanted to talk to you first."

Her lids lowered, narrowing her protruding eyes. "Do you have something to say?"

I swallowed. "I was wondering..." I only had the same question I'd been unable to answer for myself. "Why? Why couldn't you let me be dead, like the rest of them? Why were you so determined to hunt me down? I didn't want to hurt anyone. I just wanted... to go my own way."

She leaped up onto her toes, shoving her face toward mine. Someone moved behind me, but I couldn't hear more than that-she was shouting in my face.

"Because I was right!" she shrieked. "More than right! Look at them all! A vile nest of killers, lurking in wait! Just like I thought, only so much worse! I knew you were out here with them! One of them! I told them there was danger! I told them!"

She stopped, panting, and took a step back from me, staring over my shoulder. I didn't look away to see what had made her retreat. I assumed it had something to do with what Jeb had just told me-once the guns come up, she backs right down. I analyzed her expression for a moment as her heavy breathing slowed.

"But they didn't listen to you. So you came for us alone."

The Seeker didn't answer. She took another step back from me, doubt twisting her expression. She looked oddly vulnerable for a second, as if my words had stripped away the shield she'd been hiding behind.

"They'll look for you, but in the end, they never believed you at all, did they?" I said, watching as each word was confirmed in her desperate eyes. It made me very sure. "So they won't take the search further than that. When they don't find you, their interest will fade. We'll be careful, as usual. They won't find us."

Now I could see true fear in her eyes for the first time. The terrible-to-her-knowledge that I was right. And I felt better for my nest of humans, my little family. I was right. They would be safe. Yet, incongruously, I didn't feel any better for myself.

I had no more questions for the Seeker. When I walked away, she would die. Would they wait until I was far enough not to hear the shot? Was there anywhere in the caves that was far enough for that?

I stared at her angry, fearful face, and I knew how deeply I hated her. How much I never wanted to see that face again for the rest of my lives.

The hate that made it impossible for me to allow her to die.

"I don't know how to save you," I whispered, too low for the humans to hear. Why did that sound like a lie in my ears? "I can't think of a way."

"Why would you want to? You're one of them!" But a spasm of hope sparked in her eyes. Jeb was right. All the bluster, all the threats... She wanted very much to stay alive.

I nodded at her accusation, a little absently because I was thinking hard and fast. "But still me," I murmured. "I don't want... I don't want..."

How to finish that sentence? I didn't want... the Seeker to die? No. That wasn't true.

I didn't want... to hate the Seeker? To hate her so much that I wanted her to die. To have her die while I hated her. Almost as if she died because of my hate.

If I truly did not want her death, would I be able to think of a way to save her? Was it my hate that was blocking an answer? Would I be responsible if she died?

Are you insane? Melanie protested.

She'd killed my friend, shot him dead in the desert, broken Lily's heart. She'd put my family in danger. As long as she lived, she was a danger to them. To Ian, to Jamie, to Jared. She would do everything in her power to see them all dead.

That's more like it. Melanie approved of this train of thought.

But if she dies, and I could have saved her if I'd wanted to... who am I then?

You have to be practical, Wanda. This is a war. Whose side are you on?

You know the answer to that.

I do. And that's who you are, Wanda.

But... but what if I could do both? What if I could save her life and keep everyone here safe at the same time?

A heavy wave of nausea rolled in my stomach as I saw the answer I'd been trying to believe didn't exist.

The only wall I'd ever built between Melanie and me crumbled to dust.

No! Mel gasped. And then screamed, NO!

The answer I must have known I would find. The answer that explained my strange premonition.

Because I could save the Seeker. Of course I could. But it would cost me. A trade. What had Kyle said? A life for a life.

The Seeker stared at me, her dark eyes full of venom.

The Host

CHAPTER 50

Sacrificed

The Seeker scrutinized my face while Mel and I fought.

No, Wanda, no!

Don't be stupid, Mel. You of all people should see the potential of this choice. Isn't this what you want?

But even as I tried to look at the happy ending, I couldn't escape the horror of this choice. This was the secret I should die to protect. The information I'd been desperate to keep safe no matter what hideous torture I was put through.

This was not the kind of torture I'd expected: a personal crisis of conscience, confused and complicated by love for my human family. Very painful, nevertheless.

I could not claim to be an expatriate if I did this. No, I would be purely a traitor.

Not for her, Wanda! Not for her! Mel howled.

Should I wait? Wait until they catch another soul? An innocent soul whom I have no reason to hate? I'll have to make the decision sometime.

Not now! Wait! Think about this!

My stomach rolled again, and I had to hunch my body forward and take a deep breath. I just managed not to gag.

"Wanda?" Jeb called in concern.

I could do it, Mel. I could justify letting her die if she was one of those innocent souls. I could let them kill her then. I could trust myself to make an objective decision.

But she's horrible, Wanda! We hate her!

Exactly. And I can't trust myself. Look at how I almost didn't see the answer...

"Wanda, you all right?"

The Seeker glared past me, toward Jeb's voice.

"Fine, Jeb," I gasped. My voice was breathy, strained. I was surprised at how bad it sounded.

The Seeker's dark eyes flickered between us, unsure. Then she recoiled from me, cringing into the wall. I recognized the pose-remembered exactly how it felt to hold it.

A gentle hand came down on my shoulder and spun me around.

"What's going on with you, hon?" Jeb asked.

"I need a minute," I told him breathlessly. I looked straight into his faded-denim eyes and told him something that was most definitely not a lie. "I have one more question. But I really need a minute to myself. Can you... wait for me?"

"Sure, we can wait a little while more. Take a breather."

I nodded and walked as quickly as I could from the prison. My legs were stiff with terror at first, but I found my stride as I moved. By the time I passed Aaron and Brandt, I was almost running.

"What happened?" I heard Aaron whisper to Brandt, his voice bewildered.

I wasn't sure where to hide while I thought. My feet, like a shuttle on automatic pilot, took me through the

I wasn't sure where to hide while I thought. My feet, like a shuttle on automatic pilot, took me through the corridors toward my sleeping room. I could only hope that it would be empty.

It was dark, barely any light from the stars trickling down through the cracked ceiling. I didn't see Lily till I tripped over her in the darkness.

I almost didn't recognize her tear-swollen face. She was curled into a tight, tiny ball on the floor in the middle of the passageway. Her eyes were wide, not quite comprehending who I was.

"Why?" she asked me.

I stared at her wordlessly.

"I said that life and love go on. But why do they? They shouldn't. Not anymore. What's the point?"

"I don't know, Lily. I'm not sure what the point is."

"Why?" she asked again, not speaking to me anymore. Her glassy eyes looked right through me.

I stepped carefully past her and hurried to my room. I had my own question that had to be answered.

To my great relief, the room was empty. I threw myself facedown on the mattress where Jamie and I slept.

When I'd told Jeb I had one more question, that was the truth. But the question was not for the Seeker. The question was for me.

The question was would I-not could I-do it?

I could save the Seeker's life. I knew how. It would not endanger any of the lives here. Except my own. I would have to trade that.

No. Melanie tried to be firm through her panic.

Please let me think.

No.

This is the thing, Mel. It's inevitable anyway. I can see that now. I should have seen it long ago. It's so obvious.

No, it isn't.

I remembered our conversation when Jamie was ill. When we were making up. I'd told her that I wouldn't erase her and that I was sorry that I couldn't give her more than that.

It wasn't so much a lie as it was an unfinished sentence. I couldn't give her more than that-and stay alive myself.

The actual lie had been given to Jared. I'd told him, just seconds later, that I didn't know how to make myself not exist. In the context of our discussion, it was true. I didn't know how to fade away, here inside Melanie. But I was surprised I hadn't heard the obvious lie right then, hadn't seen in that moment what I was seeing now. Of course I knew how to make myself not exist.

It was just that I had never considered that option viable, ultimate betrayal that it was to every soul on this planet.

Once the humans knew that I had this answer, the one they had murdered for over and over again, it would cost me.

No, Wanda!

Don't you want to be free?

A long pause.

I wouldn't ask you for this, she finally said. And I wouldn't do it for you. And I sure as hell wouldn't do it for the Seeker!

You don't have to ask. I think I might have volunteered... eventually.

Why do you think that? she demanded, her tone close to a sob. It touched me. I expected her to be elated.

In part because of them. Jared and Jamie. I can give them the whole world, everything they want. I can give them you. I probably would have realized that... someday. Who knows? Maybe Jared would have asked. You know I wouldn't have said no.

Ian's right. You're too self-sacrificing. You don't have any limits. You need limits, Wanda!

Ah, Ian, I moaned. A new pain twisted through me, surprisingly close to my heart.

You'll take the whole world away from him. Everything he wants.

It would never work with Ian. Not in this body, even though he loves it. It doesn't love him.

Wanda, I... Melanie struggled for words. Still, the joy I expected from her did not come. Again, this touched me. I don't think I can let you do this. You're more important than that. In the bigger picture, you are of much more value to them than I am. You can help them; you can save them. I can't do any of that. You have to stay.

I can't see any other way. Mel. I wonder how I didn't see it sooner. It seems so completely obvious. Of

I can't see any other way, then I wonder how I didn't see it sooner. It seems so completely obvious. Of course I have to go. Of course I have to give you yourself back. I already knew we souls were wrong to come here. So I don't have any choice now but to do the right thing, and leave. You all survived without me before; you'll do it again. You've learned so much about the souls from me-you'll help them. Can't you see? This is the happy ending. It's the way they all need the story to finish. I can give them hope. I can give them... not a future. Maybe not that. But as much as I can. Everything I can.

No, Wanda, no.

She was crying, becoming incoherent. Her sorrow brought tears to my eyes. I'd no idea that she cared so much for me. Almost as much as I cared for her. I hadn't realized that we loved each other.

Even if Jared had never asked me for this, even if Jared did not exist... Once this path had occurred to me, I would have had to proceed down it. I loved her that much.

No wonder the success rate for resistant hosts was so low here on Earth. Once we learned to love our human host, what hope did we souls have? We could not exist at the expense of one we loved. Not a soul. A soul could not live that way.

I rolled myself over and, in the starlight, I looked at my body.

My hands were dirty and scratched, but under the surface blemishes, they were beautiful. The skin was a pretty sun-browned color; even bleached in the pale light, it was pretty. The nails were chewed short but still healthy and smooth, with little half moons of white at the bases. I fluttered my fingers, watching the muscles pull the bones in graceful patterns. I let them dance above me, where they became black fluid shapes against the stars.

I ran them through my hair. It was almost to my shoulders now. Mel would like that. After a few weeks of shampoo in hotel showers and Health vitamins, it was glossy and soft again.

I stretched my arms out as far as they would go, tugging against the tendons until some of my joints cracked. My arms felt strong. They could pull me up a mountainside, they could carry a heavy load, they could plow a field. But they were also soft. They could hold a child, they could comfort a friend, they could love... but that was not for me.

I took a deep breath, and tears welled out of the corners of my eyes and rolled down my temples into my hair.

I tensed the muscles in my legs, felt their ready strength and speed. I wanted to run, to have an open field that I could race across just to see how fast I could go. I wanted to do this barefoot, so I could feel the earth beneath my feet. I wanted to feel the wind fly through my hair. I wanted it to rain, so that I could smell it in the air as I ran.

My feet flexed and pointed slowly, to the rhythm of my breathing. In and out. Flex and point. It felt nice.

I traced my face with my fingertips. They were warm on my skin, skin that was smooth and pretty. I was glad I was giving Melanie her face back the way it had been. I closed my eyes and stroked my eyelids.

I'd lived in so many bodies, but never one I loved like this. Never one that I craved in this way. Of course, this would be the one I'd have to give up.

The irony made me laugh, and I concentrated on the feel of the air that popped in little bubbles from my chest and up through my throat. Laughter was like a fresh breeze-it cleaned its way through the body, making everything feel good. Did other species have such a simple healer? I couldn't remember one.

I touched my lips and remembered how it felt to kiss Jared, and how it felt to kiss Ian. Not everyone got to kiss so many other beautiful bodies. I'd had more than some, even in this short time.

It was just so short! Maybe a year now, I wasn't completely sure. Just one quick revolution of a blue green planet around an unexceptional yellow star. The shortest life of any I'd ever lived.

The shortest, the most important, the most heartbreaking of lives. The life that would forever define me. The life that had finally tied me to one star, to one planet, to one small family of strangers.

A little more time... would that be so wrong?

No, Mel whispered. Just take a little more time.

You never know how much time you'll have, I whispered back.

But I did. I knew exactly how much time I had. I couldn't take any more time. My time was up.

I was going anyway. I had to do the right thing, be my true self, with what time I had left.

With a sigh that seemed to come all the way from the soles of my feet and the palms of my hands, I got up.

Aaron and Brandt wouldn't wait forever. And now I had a few more questions that I needed answered. This time, the questions were for Doc.

The caves were full of sad, cast-down eyes. It was easy enough to slip unobtrusively past them all. No one

cared what I was doing right now, except maybe Jeb, Brandt, and Aaron, and they weren't here.

I didn't have an open, rainy field, but at least I had the long south tunnel. It was too dark to run flat out the way I wanted, but I kept up a steady jog. It felt good as my muscles warmed.

I expected I would find Doc already there, but I'd wait if I had to. He would be alone. Poor Doc, that was usually the case now.

Doc had been sleeping alone in his hospital since the night we'd saved Jamie's life. Sharon had taken her things from their room and moved them to her mother's, and Doc wouldn't sleep in the empty room.

Such a great hatred. Sharon would rather kill her own happiness, and Doc's, too, than forgive him for helping me heal Jamie.

Sharon and Maggie were barely a presence in the caves anymore. They looked past everyone now, the way they used to look past only me. I wondered if that would change when I was gone, or if they were both so rigid in their grudge that it would be too late for them to change.

What an extraordinarily stupid way to waste time.

For the first time ever, the south tunnel felt short. Before I thought I'd gone halfway, I could see Doc's light glowing dimly from the rough arch ahead. He was home.

I slowed myself to a walk before I interrupted him. I didn't want to scare him, to make him think there was an emergency.

He was still startled when I appeared, a little breathless, in the stone doorway.

He jumped up from behind his desk. The book he was reading fell out of his hands.

"Wanda? Is something wrong?"

"No, Doc," I reassured him. "Everything's fine."

"Does someone need me?"

"Just me." I gave him a weak smile.

He walked around his desk to meet me, his eyes wide with curiosity. He paused half a step away and raised one eyebrow.

His long face was gentle, the opposite of alarming. It was hard to remember how he'd looked like a monster to me before.

"You are a man of your word," I began.

He nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but I held one hand up.

"No one will ever test that more than I will test it now," I warned him.

He waited, eyes confused and wary.

I took a deep breath, felt it expand my lungs.

"I know how to do what you've been ending so many lives to discover. I know how to take the souls from your bodies without harm to either. Of course I know that. We all have to, in case of an emergency. I even performed the emergency procedure once, when I was a Bear."

I stared at him, waiting for his response. It took him a long moment, and his eyes grew wilder every second.

"Why are you telling me this?" he finally gasped.

"Because I... I am going to give you the knowledge you need." I held up my hand again. "But only if you will give me what I want in return. I'm warning you right now, it won't be any easier for you to give me what I want than it will be for me to give you what you want."

His face was fiercer than I'd ever seen it. "Name your terms."

"You can't kill them-the souls you remove. You must give me your word-your promise, your oath, your vow-that you will give them safe conduct on to another life. This means some danger; you will have to have cryotanks, and you will have to get those souls onto shuttles off-planet. You have to send them to another world to live. But they won't be able to hurt you. By the time they reach their next planet, your grandchildren will be dead."

Would my conditions mitigate my guilt in this? Only if Doc could be trusted.

He was thinking very hard as I explained. I watched his face to see what he would make of my demand. He didn't look angry, but his eyes were still wild.

"You don't want us to kill the Seeker?" he guessed.

I didn't answer his question because he wouldn't understand the answer; I did want them to kill her. That was the whole problem. Instead, I explained further.

"She'll be the first, the test. I want to make sure, while I'm still here, that you're going to follow through. I

will do the separation myself. When she is safe, I'll teach you how it's done."

"On who?"

"Kidnapped souls. The same as before. I can't guarantee you that the human minds will come back. I don't know if the erased can return. We'll see with the Seeker."

Doc blinked, processing something. "What do you mean, while you are still here? Are you leaving?"

I stared at him, waiting for the realization to hit. He stared back, uncomprehending.

"Don't you realize what I'm giving you?" I whispered.

Finally, comprehension slammed home in his expression.

I spoke quickly, before he could. "There's something else I'm going to ask you for, Doc. I don't want to... I won't be shipped off to another planet. This is my planet, it truly is. And yet, there's really no place for me here. So... I know it might... offend some of the others. Don't tell them if you think they won't allow it. Lie if you have to. But I'd like to be buried by Walt and Wes. Can you do that for me? I won't take up much space." I smiled weakly again.

No! Melanie was howling. No, no, no, no...

"No, Wanda," Doc objected, too, with a shocked expression.

"Please, Doc," I whispered, wincing against the protest in my head, which was getting louder. "I don't think Wes or Walt will mind."

"That's not what I meant! I can't kill you, Wanda. Ugh! I'm so sick of death, so sick of killing my friends." Doc's voice caught in a sob.

I put my hand on his thin arm, rubbed it. "People die here. It happens." Kyle had said something to that effect. Funny that I should quote Kyle of all people twice in one night.

"What about Jared and Jamie?" Doc asked in a choked voice.

"They'll have Melanie. They'll be fine."

"Ian?"

Through my teeth. "Better off without me."

Doc shook his head, wiping at his eyes. "I need to think about this, Wanda."

"We don't have long. They won't wait forever before they kill the Seeker."

"I don't mean about that part. I agree to those terms. But I don't think I can kill you."

"It's all or none, Doc. You have to decide right now. And..." I realized I had one more demand. "And you can't tell anyone else about the last part of our agreement. No one. Those are my terms, take them or leave them. Do you want to know how to remove a soul from a human body?"

Doc shook his head again. "Let me think."

"You already know the answer, Doc. This is what you've been searching for."

He just kept shaking his head slowly back and forth.

I ignored that symbol of denial because we both knew his choice was made.

"I'll get Jared," I said. "We'll make a quick raid for cryotanks. Hold off the others. Tell them... tell them the truth. Tell them I'm going to help you get the Seeker out of that body."

The Host

CHAPTER 51

Prepared

I found Jared and Jamie in our room, waiting for me, worry on both their faces. Jared must have talked to Jeb.

"Are you all right?" Jared asked me, while Jamie jumped up and threw his arms around my waist.

I wasn't sure how to answer his question. I didn't know the answer. "Jared, I need your help."

Jared was on his feet as soon as I was done speaking. Jamie leaned back to look at my face. I didn't meet Jamie's gaze. I wasn't sure how much I could bear right now.

"What do you need me to do?" Jared asked.

"I'm making a raid. I could use some... extra muscle."

"What are we after?" He was intense, already shifting into his mission mode.

"I'll explain on the way. We don't have a lot of time."

"Can I come?" Jamie said.

"No!" Jared and I said together.

Jamie frowned and let me go, sinking down onto the mattress and crossing his legs. He put his face in his hands and sulked. I couldn't look directly at him before I ducked out of the room. I was already yearning to sit beside him, to hold him tight and forget this whole mess.

Jared followed as I retraced my path through the south tunnel.

"Why this way?" he asked.

"I..." He would know if I tried to lie or evade. "I don't want to run into anyone. Jeb, Aaron, or Brandt, particularly."

"Why?"

"I don't want to have to explain myself to them. Not yet."

He was quiet, trying to make sense of my answer.

I changed the subject. "Do you know where Lily is? I don't think she should be alone. She seems..."

"Ian's with her."

"That's good. He's the kindest."

Ian would help Lily-he was exactly what she needed now. Who would help Ian when... ? I shook my head, shaking the thought away.

"What are we in such a hurry to get?" Jared asked me.

I took a deep breath before I answered him. "Cryotanks."

The south tunnel was black. I could not see his face. His footsteps did not falter beside me, and he didn't say anything for several minutes. When he spoke again, I could hear that he was focusing on the raid-single-minded, setting aside whatever curiosity he felt until after the mission was planned to his satisfaction.

"Where do we get them?"

"Empty cryotanks are stored outside Healing facilities until they're needed. With more souls coming in than leaving, there will be a surplus. No one will guard them; no one will notice if some go missing."

"Are you sure? Where did you get this information?"

"I saw them in Chicago, piles and piles of them. Even the little facility we went to in Tucson had a small store of them, crated outside the delivery bay."

"If they were crated, then how can you be sure -"

"Haven't you noticed our fondness for labels?"

"I'm not doubting you," he said. "I just want to make sure that you've thought this through."

I heard the double meaning in his words.

"I have."

"Let's get it done, then."

Doc was already gone-already with Jeb, as we hadn't passed him on the way. He must have left right behind me. I wondered how his news was being taken. I hoped they weren't stupid enough to discuss it in front of the Seeker. Would she shred her human host's brain if she guessed what I was doing? Would she assume I'd turned traitor entirely? That I would give the humans what they needed with no restrictions?

Wasn't that what I was about to do, though? When I was gone, would Doc bother to keep his word?

Yes, he would try. I believed that. I had to believe that. But he couldn't do it alone. And who would help him?

We scrambled up the tight black vent that opened onto the southern face of the rocky hill, about halfway up the low peak. The eastern edge of the horizon was turning gray, with just a hint of pink bleeding into the line between sky and rock.

My eyes were locked on my feet as I climbed down. It was necessary; there was no path, and the loose rocks made for treacherous footing. But even if the way had been paved and smooth, I doubted I would have been able to lift my eyes. My shoulders, too, seemed trapped in a slump.

Traitor. Not a misfit, not a wanderer. Just a traitor. I was putting my gentle brothers' and sisters' lives into the angry and motivated hands of my adopted human family.

My humans had every right to hate the souls. This was a war, and I was giving them a weapon. A way to kill with impunity.

I considered this as we ran through the desert in the growing light of dawn-ran because, with the Seekers looking, we shouldn't be out in the daylight.

Focusing on this angle-viewing my choice not as a sacrifice but rather as arming the humans in exchange for the Seeker's life I knew that it was wrong. And if I was trying to save only the Seeker, this would be the

for the Seeker's life-I knew that it was wrong. And if I was trying to save only the Seeker, this would be the moment when I would change my mind and turn around. She wasn't worth selling out the others. Even she would agree with that.

Or would she? I suddenly wondered. The Seeker didn't seem to be as... what was the word Jared had used? Altruistic. As altruistic as the rest of us. Maybe she would count her own life dearer than the lives of many.

But it was too late to change my mind. I'd already thought far beyond just saving the Seeker. For one thing, this would happen again. The humans would kill any souls they came across unless I gave them another option. More than that, I was going to save Melanie, and that was worth the sacrifice. I was going to save Jared and Jamie, too. Might as well save the repugnant Seeker while I was at it.

The souls were wrong to be here. My humans deserved their world. I could not give it back to them, but I could give them this. If only I could be sure that they would not be cruel.

I would just have to trust Doc, and hope.

And maybe wring the promise from a few more of my friends, just in case.

I wondered how many human lives I would save. How many souls' lives I might save. The only one I couldn't save now was myself.

I sighed heavily. Even over the sound of our exerted breathing, Jared heard that. In my peripheral vision, I saw his face turn, felt his eyes boring into me, but I did not look over to meet his gaze. I stared at the ground.

We got to the jeep's hiding place before the sun had climbed over the eastern peaks, though the sky was already light blue. We ducked into the shallow cave just as the first rays painted the desert sand gold.

Jared grabbed two bottles of water out of the backseat, tossed one to me, and then lounged against the wall. He gulped down half a bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before he spoke.

"I could tell you were in a hurry to get out of there, but we need to wait until dark if you're planning a smash and grab."

I swallowed my mouthful of water. "That's fine. I'm sure they'll wait for us now."

His eyes searched my face.

"I saw your Seeker," he told me, watching my reaction. "She's... energetic."

I nodded. "And vocal."

He smiled and rolled his eyes. "She doesn't seem to enjoy the accommodations we provided."

My gaze dropped to the floor. "Could be worse," I mumbled. The strangely jealous hurt I'd been feeling leaked, uninvited, into my voice.

"That's true," he agreed, his voice subdued.

"Why are they so kind to her?" I whispered. "She killed Wes."

"Well, that's your fault."

I stared up at him, surprised to see the slight curve of his mouth; he was teasing me.

"Mine?"

His small smile wavered. "They didn't want to feel like monsters. Not again. They're trying to make up for before, only a little too late-and with the wrong soul. I didn't realize that would... hurt your feelings. I would have thought you'd like it better that way."

"I do." I didn't want them to hurt anyone. "It's always better to be kind. I just..." I took a deep breath. "I'm glad I know why."

Their kindness was for me, not for her. My shoulders felt lighter.

"It's not a good feeling-knowing that you profoundly deserve the title of monster. It's better to be kind than to feel guilty." He smiled again and then yawned. That made me yawn.

"Long night," he commented. "And we've got another one coming. We should sleep."

I was glad for his suggestion. I knew he had many questions about exactly what this raid meant. I also knew he would have already put several things together. And I didn't want to discuss any of it.

I stretched out on the smooth patch of sand beside the jeep. To my shock, Jared came to lie beside me, right beside me. He curled around the curve of my back.

"Here," he said, and he reached around to slide his fingers under my face. He pulled my head up from the ground and then moved his arm under it, making a pillow for me. He let his other arm drape over my waist.

It took a few seconds before I was able to respond. "Thanks."

He yawned. I felt his breath warm the back of my neck. "Get some rest, Wanda."

Holding me in what could only be considered an embrace, Jared fell asleep quickly, as he had always been able to do. I tried to relax with his arm warm around me but it took a long time.

This embrace made me wonder how much he had already guessed.

My weary thoughts tangled and twisted. Jared was right-it had been a very long night. Though not half long enough. The rest of my days and nights were going to fly by as if they were only minutes.

The next thing I knew, Jared was shaking me awake. The light in the little cavern was dim and orangey. Sunset.

Jared pulled me to my feet and handed me a hiker's meal bar-this was the kind of rations they kept with the jeep. We ate, and drank the rest of our water, in silence. Jared's face was serious and focused.

"Still in a hurry?" he asked as we climbed into the jeep.

No. I wanted the time to stretch out forever.

"Yes." What was the point in putting it off? The Seeker and her body would die if we waited too long, and I would still have to make the same choice.

"We'll hit Phoenix, then. It's logical that they wouldn't notice this kind of raid. It doesn't make sense for humans to take your cold-storage tanks. What possible use could we have for them?"

The question didn't sound at all rhetorical, and I could feel him looking at me again. But I stared ahead at the rocks and said nothing.

It had been dark for a while by the time we traded vehicles and got to the freeway. Jared waited a few careful minutes with the inconspicuous sedan's lights off. I counted ten cars passing by. Then there was a long darkness between the headlights, and Jared pulled onto the road.

The trip to Phoenix was very short, though Jared kept the speed scrupulously below the limit. Time was speeding up, as if the Earth were spinning faster.

We settled into the steady-moving traffic, flowing with it along the highway that circled the flat, sprawling city. I saw the hospital from the road. We followed another car up the exit ramp, moving evenly, without hurry.

Jared turned into the main parking lot.

"Where now?" he asked, tense.

"See if this road continues around the back. The tanks will be by a loading area."

Jared drove slowly. There were many souls here, going in and out of the facility, some of them in scrubs. Healers. No one paid us any particular attention.

The road hugged the sidewalk, then curved around the north side of the building complex.

"Look. Shipping trucks. Head that way."

We passed between a wing of low buildings and a parking garage. Several trucks, delivering medical supplies no doubt, were backed into receiving ports. I scanned the crates on the dock, all labeled.

"Keep going... though we might want to grab some of those on the way back. See-Heal... Cool... Still? I wonder what that one is."

I liked that these supplies were labeled and left unguarded. My family wouldn't go without the things they needed when I was gone. When I was gone; it seemed that phrase was tacked on to all of my thoughts now.

We rounded the back of another building. Jared drove a little faster and kept his eyes forward-there were people here, four of them, unloading a truck onto a dock. It was the exactness of their movements that caught my attention. They didn't handle the smallish boxes roughly; quite the contrary, they placed them with infinite care onto the waist-high lip of concrete.

I didn't really need the label for confirmation, but just then, one of the unloaders turned his box so the black letters faced me directly.

"This is the place we want. They're unloading occupied tanks right now. The empty ones won't be far... Ah! There, on the other side. That shed is half full of them. I'll bet the closed sheds are all the way full."

Jared kept driving at the same careful speed, turning the corner to the side of the building.

He snorted quietly.

"What?" I asked.

"Figures. See?"

He jerked his chin toward the sign on the building.

This was the maternity wing.

"Ah," I said. "Well, you'll always know where to look, won't you?"

His eyes flashed to my face when I said that, and then back to the road.

"We'll have to wait for a bit. Looked like they were almost finished."

Jared circled the hospital again, then parked at the back of the biggest lot, away from the lights.

He killed the engine and slumped against the seat. He reached over and took my hand. I knew that he was

about to ask, and I tried to prepare myself.

“Wanda?”

“Yes?”

“You’re going to save the Seeker, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Because it’s the right thing to do?” he guessed.

“That’s one reason.”

He was silent for a moment.

“You know how to get the soul out without hurting the body?”

My heart thumped hard once, and I had to swallow before I could answer. “Yes. I’ve done it before. In an emergency. Not here.”

“Where?” he asked. “What was the emergency?”

It was a story I’d never told them before, for obvious reasons. It was one of my best. Lots of action. Jamie would have loved it. I sighed and began in a low voice.

“On the Mists Planet. I was with my friend Harness Light and a guide. I don’t remember the guide’s name. They called me Lives in the Stars there. I already had a bit of a reputation.”

Jared chuckled.

“We were making a pilgrimage across the fourth great ice field to see one of the more celebrated crystal cities. It was supposed to be a safe route—that’s why there were only three of us.

“Claw beasts like to dig pits and bury themselves in the snow. Camouflage, you know. A trap.

“One moment, there was nothing but the flat, endless snow. Then, the next moment, it seemed like the entire field of white was exploding into the sky.

“An average adult Bear has about the mass of a buffalo. A full-grown claw beast is closer to the mass of a blue whale. This one was bigger than most.

“I couldn’t see the guide. The claw beast had sprung up between us, facing where Harness Light and I stood. Bears are faster than claw beasts, but this one had the advantage of the ambush. Its huge stone-like pincers swooped down and sheared Harness Light in half before I’d really processed what was happening.”

A car drove slowly down the side of the parking lot. We sat silent until it had passed.

“I hesitated. I should have started running, but... my friend was dying there on the ice. Because of that hesitation, I would have died, too, if the claw beast hadn’t been distracted. I found out later that our guide—I wish I could remember his name!—had attacked the claw beast’s tail, hoping to give us a chance to run. The claw beast’s attack had stirred up enough snow that it was like a blizzard. The lack of visibility would help us escape. He didn’t know it was already too late for Harness Light to run.

“The claw beast turned on the guide, and his second left leg kicked us, sending me flying. Harness Light’s upper body landed beside me. His blood melted the snow.”

I paused to shudder.

“My next action made no sense, because I had no body for Harness Light. We were midway between cities, much too far to run to either. It was probably cruel, too, to take him out with no painkillers. But I couldn’t stand to let him die inside the broken half of his Bear host.

“I used the back of my hand—the ice-cutting side. It was too wide a blade... It caused a lot of damage. I could only hope that Harness Light was far gone enough that he wouldn’t feel the extra pain.

“Using my soft inside fingers, I coaxed Harness Light from the Bear’s brain.

“He was still alive. I barely paused to ascertain this. I shoved him into the egg pocket in the center of my body, between the two hottest hearts. This would keep him from dying of cold, but he would only last a few short minutes without a body. And where would I find a host body in this empty waste?

“I thought of trying to share my host, but I doubted I could stay conscious through the procedure to insert him into my own head. And then, having no healing medicine, I would die quickly. With all those hearts, Bears bled very fast.

“The claw beast roared, and I felt the ground shake as its huge paws thudded down. I didn’t know where our guide was, or if he lived. I didn’t know how long it would take the claw beast to find us half-buried in the snow. I was right beside the severed Bear. The bright blood would draw the monster’s eyes.

“And then I got this crazy idea.”

I paused to laugh quietly to myself.

“I didn’t have a Bear host for Harness Light. I couldn’t use my body. The guide was dead or had fled. But

there was one other body on the ice field.

“It was insanity, but all I could think of was Harness Light. We weren’t even close friends, but I knew he was slowly dying, right between my hearts. I couldn’t endure that.

“I heard the angry claw beast roaring, and I ran toward the sound. Soon I could see its thick white fur. I ran straight to its third left leg and launched myself as high up the leg as I could. I was a good jumper. I used all six of my hands, the knife sides, to yank myself up the side of the beast. It roared and spun, but that didn’t help. Picture a dog chasing its tail. Claw beasts have very small brains—a limited intelligence.

“I made it to the beast’s back and ran up the double spine, digging in with my knives so that it couldn’t shake me off.

“It only took seconds to get up to the beast’s head. But that was where the greatest difficulty waited. My ice cutters were only... about as long as your forearm, maybe. The claw beast’s hide was twice as thick. I swung my arm down as hard as I could, slashing through the first layer of fur and membrane. The claw beast screamed and reared back on its hindmost legs. I almost fell.

“I lodged four of my hands into its hide—it screamed and thrashed. With the other two, I took turns cutting at the gash I’d made. The skin was so thick and tough, I didn’t know if I would be able to saw through.

“The claw beast went berserk. It shook so hard that it was all I could do to hold on for a moment. But time was running out for Harness Light. I shoved my hands into the hole and tried to rip it open.

“Then the claw beast threw itself backward onto the ice.

“If we hadn’t been over its lair, the pit it had dug to hide in, that would have crushed me. As it was, though it knocked me silly, the fall actually helped. My knives were already in the beast’s neck. When I hit the ground, the weight of the beast drove my cutters deep through its skin. Deeper than I needed.

“We were both stunned; I was half smothered. I knew I had to do something right away, but I couldn’t remember what it was. The beast started to roll, dazed. The fresh air cleared my head, and I remembered Harness Light.

“Protecting him from the cold as well as I could in the soft side of my hands, I moved him from my egg pocket into the claw beast’s neck.

“The beast got to its feet and bucked again. This time I flew off. I’d let go of my hold to insert Harness Light, you see. The claw beast was infuriated. The wound on its head wasn’t nearly enough to kill it—just annoy it.

“The snow had settled enough that I was in plain sight, especially as I was painted with the beast’s blood. It’s a very bright color, a color you don’t have here. It raised its pincers, and they swung toward me. I thought that was it, and I was comforted a little that at least I would die trying.

“And then the pincers hit the snow beside me. I couldn’t believe it had missed! I stared up at the huge, hideous face, and I almost had to... well, not laugh. Bears don’t laugh. But that was the feeling. Because that ugly face was torn with confusion and surprise and chagrin. No claw beast had ever worn such an expression before.

“It had taken Harness Light a few minutes to bind himself to the claw beast—it was such a big area, he really had to extend himself. But then he was in control. He was confused and slow—he didn’t have much of a brain to work with, but it was enough that he knew I was his friend.

“I had to ride him to the crystal city—to hold the wound closed on his neck until we could reach a Healer. That caused quite a stir. For a while they called me Rides the Beast. I didn’t like it. I made them go back to my other name.”

I’d been staring ahead, toward the lights of the hospital and the figures of the souls crossing in front of those lights, as I told the story. Now I looked at Jared for the first time. He was gaping at me, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open.

It really was one of my best stories. I’d have to get Mel to promise that she’d tell it to Jamie when I was...

“They’re probably finished unloading, don’t you think?” I said quickly. “Let’s finish this and get back home.”

He stared at me for one more moment, and then shook his head slowly.

“Yes, let’s finish this, Wanderer, Lives in the Stars, Rides the Beast. Stealing a few unguarded crates won’t present much of a challenge for you, will it?”

The Host

CHAPTER 52

Separated

We brought our plunder in through the south vent, though this meant that the jeep would have to be moved before dawn. My main concern with using the bigger entrance was that the Seeker would hear the commotion our arrival was sure to cause. I wasn't sure if she had any idea of what I was going to do, and I didn't want to give her any reason to kill her host and herself. The story Jeb had told me about one of their captives—the man who had simply collapsed, leaving no external evidence on the outside of the havoc wreaked inside his skull—haunted my thoughts.

The hospital was not empty. As I squeezed myself through the last tight bubble of space out into the main room, I found Doc preparing for the operation. His desk was laid out; on it, a propane lantern—the brightest illumination we had available—waited to be lit. The scalpels glinted in the duller blue light of the solar lamp.

I had known that Doc would agree to my terms, but seeing him thus occupied sent a wave of nervous nausea through me. Or maybe it was just the memory of that other day that sickened me, the day I'd caught him with blood on his hands.

"You're back," he said with relief. I realized that he'd been worried about us, just as everyone worried when someone left the safety of the caves.

"We brought you a gift," Jared said as he pushed himself free behind me. He straightened up and reached back for a box. With a flourish, he held it up, displaying the label on the side.

"Heal!" Doc crowed. "How much did you get?"

"Two cases. And we've found a much better way to renew our stores than to have Wanda stabbing herself."

Doc did not laugh at Jared's joke. Instead he turned to stare at me piercingly. We both must have been thinking the same thing: Convenient, since Wanda won't be around.

"Did you get the cryotanks?" he asked, more subdued.

Jared noticed the look and the tension. He glanced at me, his expression impossible to read.

"Yes," I answered. "Ten of them. It was all the car could hold."

While I spoke, Jared yanked on the rope behind him. With a clatter of loose rock, the second box of Heal, followed by the tanks, tumbled onto the floor behind him. The tanks clanked like metal, though they were built of no element that existed on this planet. I'd told him it was fine to treat the empty cryotanks roughly; they were built to withstand much worse abuse than being tugged through a stone channel. They glinted on the floor now, looking shiny and pristine.

Doc picked one up, freeing it from the rope, and turned it around in his hands.

"Ten?" The number seemed to surprise him. Did he think it too many? Or not enough? "Are they difficult to use?"

"No. Extremely easy. I'll show you how."

Doc nodded, his eyes examining the alien construction. I could feel Jared watching me, but I kept my eyes on Doc.

"What did Jeb, Brandt, and Aaron say?" I asked.

Doc looked up, locked his eyes on mine. "They're... in agreement with your terms."

I nodded, not convinced. "I won't show you unless I believe that."

"That's fair."

Jared glared at us, confused and frustrated.

"What did you tell him?" Doc asked me, being cautious.

"Just that I was going to save the Seeker." I turned to look in Jared's general direction without meeting his gaze. "Doc has promised me that if I show him how to perform the separation, you will give the released souls safe conduct to another life on another planet. No killing."

Jared nodded thoughtfully, his eyes flickering back to Doc. "I can agree to those terms. And I can make sure the others follow through. I assume you have a plan to get them off-planet?"

"It will be no more dangerous than what we did tonight. Just the opposite—adding to the stack rather than taking from it."

"Okay."

"Did you... have a time schedule in mind?" Doc asked. He tried to sound nonchalant, but I could hear the eagerness behind his voice.

caginess behind his voice.

He just wanted the answer that had eluded him for so long, I tried to tell myself. It wasn't that he was in a hurry to kill me.

"I have to take the jeep back-can you wait? I'd like to watch this."

"Sure, Jared," Doc agreed.

"Won't take me long," Jared promised as he shoved himself back into the vent.

That I was sure of. It wouldn't take enough time at all.

Doc and I did not speak until the sound of Jared's scrambling exit had faded.

"You didn't talk about... Melanie?" he asked softly.

I shook my head. "I think he sees where this is going. He must guess my plan."

"But not all of it. He won't allow -"

"He won't get a say," I interrupted severely. "All or nothing, Doc."

Doc sighed. After a moment of silence, he stretched and glanced toward the main exit. "I'm going to go talk to Jeb, get things ready."

He reached for a bottle on the table. The chloroform. I was sure the souls had something better to use. I would have to try to find it for Doc, before I was gone.

"Who knows about this?"

"Still just Jeb, Aaron, and Brandt. They all want to watch."

This didn't surprise me; Aaron and Brandt would be suspicious. "Don't tell anyone else. Not tonight."

Doc nodded, then he disappeared into the black corridor.

I went to sit against the wall, as far from the prepared cot as I could get. I'd have my turn on top of it all too soon.

Trying to think of something besides that grim fact, I realized that I hadn't heard from Melanie since... When was the last time she'd spoken to me? When I'd made the deal with Doc? I was belatedly surprised that the sleeping arrangements by the jeep today had not elicited a reaction from her.

Mel?

No answer.

It wasn't like before, so I didn't panic. I could definitely feel her there in my head, but she was... ignoring me? What was she doing?

Mel? What's going on?

No answer.

Are you mad at me? I'm sorry about before, by the jeep. I didn't do anything, you know, so it's not really fair -

She interrupted me, exasperated. Oh, stop. I'm not mad at you. Leave me alone.

Why won't you talk to me?

No answer.

I pushed a little harder, hoping to pick up the direction of her thoughts. She tried to keep me out, to put the wall in place, but it was too weak from disuse. I saw her plan.

I tried to keep my mental tone even. Have you lost your mind?

In a manner of speaking, she teased halfheartedly.

You think that if you can make yourself disappear, that will stop me?

What else can I do to stop you? If you've got a better idea, please share.

I don't get it, Melanie. Don't you want them back? Don't you want to be with Jared again? With Jamie?

She writhed, fighting the obviousness of the answer. Yes, but... I can't... She took a moment to steady herself. I find myself unable to be the death of you, Wanda. I can't stand it.

I saw the depth of her pain, and tears formed in my eyes.

Love you too, Mel. But there's not room for the both of us here. In this body, in this cave, in their lives...

I disagree.

Look, just stop trying to annihilate yourself, okay? Because if I think you can do it, I'll make Doc pull me out today. Or I'll tell Jared. Just imagine what he would do.

I imagined it for her, smiling a little through my tears. Remember? He said no guarantees about what he would or wouldn't do to keep you here. I thought of those burning kisses in the hall... thought of other kisses and other nights in her memory. My face warmed as I blushed.

You fight dirty.

You bet I do.

I'm not giving up.

You've been warned. No more silent treatment.

We thought of other things then, things that didn't hurt. Like where we would send the Seeker. Mel was all for the Mists Planet after my story tonight, but I thought the Planet of the Flowers would be more fitting. There wasn't a mellower planet in the universe. The Seeker needed a nice long lifetime eating sunshine.

We thought of my memories, the pretty ones. The ice castles and the night music and the colored suns. They were like fairytales to her. And she told me fairytales, too. Glass slippers, poisoned apples, mermaids who wanted to have souls...

Of course, we didn't have time to tell many stories.

They all returned together. Jared had come back through the main entrance. It had taken so very little time- perhaps he'd just driven the jeep around to the north side and hidden it under the overhang there. In a hurry.

I heard their voices coming, subdued, serious, low, and knew from their tone that the Seeker was with them. Knew that the time had come for the first stage of my death.

No.

Pay attention. You're going to have to help them do this when I'm -

No!

But she wasn't protesting my instruction, just the conclusion of my thought.

Jared was the one who carried the Seeker into the room. He came first, the others behind. Aaron and Brandt both had the guns ready-in case she was only feigning unconsciousness, perhaps, and about to jump up and attack them with her tiny hands. Jeb and Doc came last, and I knew Jeb's canny eyes would be on my face. How much had he figured out already with his crazy, insightful shrewdness?

I kept myself focused on the task at hand.

Jared laid the Seeker's inert form on the cot with exceptional gentleness. This might have bothered me before, but now it touched me. I understood that he did this for me, wishing that he could have treated me this way in the beginning.

"Doc, where's the No Pain?"

"I'll get it for you," he murmured.

I stared at the Seeker's face while I waited, wondering what it would look like when her host was free. Would anything be left? Would the host be empty or would the rightful owner reassert herself? Would the face be less repugnant to me when another awareness looked out of those eyes?

"Here you go." Doc put the canister in my hand.

"Thanks."

I pulled out one thin tissue square and handed the container back to him.

I found myself reluctant to touch the Seeker, but I made my hands move swiftly and purposefully as I pulled her chin down and put the No Pain on her tongue. Her face was very small-it made my hands feel big. Her tiny size always threw me off. It seemed so inappropriate.

I closed her mouth again. It was moist-the medicine would dissolve quickly.

"Jared, could you please roll her onto her stomach?" I asked.

He did as I asked-again, gently. Just then, the propane lantern flared to life. The cave was suddenly bright, almost like daylight. I glanced up instinctively and saw that Doc had covered the big holes in the roof with tarps to keep our light from escaping. He'd done a lot of preparation in our absence.

It was very quiet. I could hear the Seeker breathing evenly in and out. I could hear the faster, tenser breathing of the men in the room with me. Someone shifted from one foot to the other, and sand ground against rock under his heel. Their stares had a physical weight on my skin.

I swallowed, hoping I could keep my voice normal. "Doc, I need Heal, Clean, Seal, and Smooth."

"Right here."

I brushed the Seeker's coarse black hair out of the way, exposing the little pink line at the base of her skull. I stared at her olive tan skin and hesitated.

"Would you cut, Doc? I don't... I don't want to."

"No problem, Wanda."

I saw only his hands as he came to stand across from me. He set a little row of white cylinders on the cot next to the Seeker's shoulder. The scalpel winked in the bright light, flashing across my face.

"Hold her hair out of the way."

I used both hands to clear her neck.

“Wish I could scrub up,” Doc muttered to himself, obviously feeling underprepared.

“It’s not really necessary. We have Clean.”

“I know.” He sighed. What he really wanted was the routine, the mental cleansing that the old habits had given him.

“How much room do you need?” he asked, hesitating with the point of the blade an inch from her skin.

I could feel the heat of the other bodies behind me, squeezing in to get a better view. They were careful not to touch either of us.

“Just the length of the scar. That will be enough.”

This didn’t seem like enough to him. “You sure?”

“Yes. Oh, wait!”

Doc pulled back.

I realized I was doing this all backward. I was no Healer. I wasn’t cut out for this. My hands were shaking. I couldn’t seem to look away from the Seeker’s body.

“Jared, could you get one of those tanks for me?”

“Of course.”

I heard him walk the few steps away, heard the dull, metallic clunk of the tank he chose knocking against the others.

“What now?”

“There’s a circle on top of the lid. Press it in.”

I heard the low hum of the cryotank as it powered on. The men muttered and shuffled their feet, moving away from it.

“Okay, on the side there should be a switch... more like a dial, actually. Can you see it?”

“Yes.”

“Spin it all the way down.”

“Okay.”

“What color is the light on top of the tank?”

“It’s... it’s just turning from purple to... bright blue. Light blue now.”

I took a deep breath. At least the tanks were functional.

“Great. Pop the lid and wait for me.”

“How?”

“Latch under the lip.”

“Got it.” I heard the click of the latch, and then the whirl of the mechanism. “It’s cold!”

“That’s sort of the point.”

“How does it work? What’s the power source?”

I sighed. “I knew the answers when I was a Spider. I don’t understand it now. Doc, you can go ahead. I’m ready.”

“Here we go,” Doc whispered as he slid the blade of the scalpel deftly, almost gracefully, through the skin. Blood coursed down the side of her neck, pooling on the towel Doc had placed underneath.

“A tiny bit deeper. Just under the edge -“

“Yes, I see.” Doc was breathing fast, excited.

Silver glinted out from the red.

“That’s good. Now you hold the hair.”

Doc switched places with me in a smooth, swift movement. He was good at his Calling. He would have made quite a Healer.

I didn’t try to hide what I was doing from him. The movements were too minute for him to have any chance of seeing. He would not be able to do this until I explained.

I slid one fingertip carefully along the back ridge of the tiny silver creature until my finger was almost entirely inserted into the hot opening at the base of the host body’s neck. I traced my way to the anterior antennae, feeling the taut lines of the bound attachments stretched tight like harp strings into the deeper recesses of her head.

I twisted my finger around the underside of the soul’s body, caressing down from the first segment along the other line of attachments, as stiff and profuse as the bristles of a brush.

I felt carefully at the juncture of these tight strings, at the tiny joints, no bigger than pinheads. I stroked my way about a third of the way down. I could have counted, but that would have taken a very long time. It would

be the two hundred seventeenth connection, but there was another way to find it. There it was, the little ridge that made this joint just a bit bigger—a seed pearl rather than a pinhead. It was smooth under my fingertip.

I pressed against it with gentle pressure, tenderly massaging. Kindness was always the way of the souls. Never violence.

“Relax,” I breathed.

And, though the soul could not hear me, it obeyed. The harp strings loosened, went slack. I could feel the slither as they retracted, feel the slight swelling of the body as it absorbed them. The process took no more than a few beats of my heart. I held my breath until I felt the soul undulate under my touch. Wriggling free.

I let it twist itself a little farther out, and then I curled my fingers gently around the tiny, fragile body. I lifted it, silver and gleaming, wet with blood that was quickly shed from the smooth casing, and cradled it in my hand.

It was beautiful. The soul whose name I’d never known billowed like a silver wave in my hand... a lovely feathered ribbon.

I couldn’t hate the Seeker in this form. An almost maternal love swept through me.

“Sleep well, little one,” I whispered.

I turned toward the faint hum of the cryotank, just to my left. Jared held it low and angled, so it was a simple matter for me to ease the soul into the shockingly cold air that gusted from the opening. I let it slide into the small space and then carefully reattached the lid.

I took the cryotank from Jared, easing it rather than tugging it, turning it with care until it was vertical, and then I hugged it to my chest. The outside of the tank was the same temperature as the warm room. I cradled it to my body, protective as any mother.

I looked back at the stranger on the table. Doc was already dust-ing Smooth over the sealed wound. We made a good team: one attending to the soul, the other to the body. Everyone was taken care of.

Doc looked up at me, his eyes full of exhilaration and wonder. “Amazing,” he murmured. “That was incredible.”

“Good job,” I whispered back.

“When do you think she’ll wake up?” Doc asked.

“That depends on how much chloroform she inhaled.”

“Not much.”

“And if she’s still there. We’ll have to wait and see.”

Before I could ask, Jared lifted the nameless woman tenderly from the cot, rolled her face-up, and laid her on another, cleaner resting place. This tenderness did not move me. This tenderness was for the human, for Melanie....

Doc went with him, checking her pulse, peeking under her lids. He shone a flashlight into her unconscious eyes and watched the pupils constrict. No light reflected back to blind him. He and Jared exchanged a long glance.

“She really did it,” Jared said, his voice low.

“Yes,” Doc agreed.

I didn’t hear Jeb sidle up next to me.

“Pretty slick, kid,” he murmured.

I shrugged.

“Feeling a smidge conflicted?”

I didn’t answer.

“Yeah. Me, too, hon. Me, too.”

Aaron and Brandt were talking behind me, their voices rising with excitement, answering each other’s thoughts before the questions were spoken.

No conflict there.

“Wait till the others hear!”

“Think of the -“

“We should go get some -“

“Right now, I’m ready -“

“Hold up,” Jeb cut Brandt off. “No soul snatching until that cryotank is safely on its way into outer space. Right, Wanda?”

“Right,” I agreed in a firmer voice, hugging the tank tighter to my chest.

Brandt and Aaron exchanged sour glances.

I was going to need more allies. Jared and Jeb and Doc were only three, though certainly the most

I was going to need more aines. Jared and Jed and Doc were only three, though certainly the most influential three here. Still, they would need support.

I knew what this meant.

It meant talking to Ian.

Others, too, of course, but Ian would have to be one of them. My heart seemed to slump lower in my chest, to curl limply in on itself. I'd done many things I had not wanted to do since joining the humans, but I couldn't remember any this sharply and pointedly painful. Even deciding to trade my life for the Seeker's-that was a huge, vast hurt, a wide field of ache, but it was almost manageable because it was so tied up in the bigger picture. Telling Ian goodbye was a razor-sharp piercing; it made the greater vision hard to see. I wished there was some way, any way, to save him from the same pain. There wasn't.

The only thing worse would be telling Jared goodbye. That one would burn and fester. Because he wouldn't feel pain. His joy would far outweigh any small regret he might feel over me.

As for Jamie, well, I wasn't planning on facing that goodbye at all.

"Wanda!" Doc's voice was sharp.

I hurried to the bed Doc was hovering over. Before I got there, I could see the tiny olive hand fisting and unfisting where it hung over the edge of the cot.

"Ah," the Seeker's familiar voice moaned from the human body. "Ah."

The room went utterly silent. Everyone looked at me, as if I were the expert on humans.

I elbowed Doc, my hands still wrapped around the tank. "Talk to her," I whispered.

"Um... Hello? Can you hear me... miss? You're safe now. Do you understand me?"

"Ah," she groaned. Her eyes fluttered open, focused quickly on Doc's face. There was no discomfort in her expression-the No Pain would be making her feel wonderful, of course. Her eyes were onyx black. They darted around the room until she found me, and recognition was quickly followed by a scowl. She looked away, back to Doc.

"Well, it feels good to have my head back," she said in a loud, clear voice. "Thanks."

The Host

CHAPTER 53

Condemned

The Seeker's host body was named Lacey; a dainty, soft, feminine name. Lacey. As inappropriate as the size, in my opinion. Like naming a pit bull Fluffy.

Lacey was just as loud as the Seeker-and still a complainer.

"You'll have to forgive me for going on and on," she insisted, allowing us no other options. "I've been shouting away in there for years and never getting to speak for myself. I've got a lot to say all stored up."

How lucky for us. I could almost make myself glad that I was leaving.

In answer to my earlier question to myself, no, the face was not less repugnant with a different awareness behind it. Because the awareness was not so very different, in the end.

"That's why we don't like you," she told me that first night, making no change from the present tense or the plural pronoun. "When she realized that you were hearing Melanie just the way she was hearing me, it made her frightened. She thought you might guess. I was her deep, dark secret." A grating laugh. "She couldn't make me shut up. That's why she became a Seeker, because she was hoping to figure out some way to better deal with resistant hosts. And then she requested being assigned to you, so she could watch how you did it. She was jealous of you; isn't that pathetic? She wanted to be strong like you. It gave us a real kick when we thought Melanie had won. I guess that didn't happen, though. I guess you did. So why did you come here? Why are you helping the rebels?"

I explained, unwillingly, that Melanie and I were friends. She didn't like that.

"Why?" she demanded.

"She's a good person."

"But why does she like you?"

Same reason.

"She says, for the same reason."

Lacey snorted. "Got her brainwashed huh?"

Lacey shook her head. "I don't understand, huh?"

Wow, she's worse than the first one.

Yes, I agreed. I can see why the Seeker was so obnoxious. Can you imagine having that in your head all the time?

I wasn't the only thing Lacey objected to.

"Do you have anywhere better to live than these caves? It's so dirty here. Isn't there a house somewhere, maybe? What do you mean we have to share rooms? Chore schedule? I don't understand. I have to work? I don't think you understand..."

Jeb had given her the usual tour the next day, trying to explain, through clenched teeth, the way we all lived here. When they'd passed me-eating in the kitchen with Ian and Jamie-he threw me a look that clearly asked why I hadn't let Aaron shoot her while that was still an option.

The tour was more crowded than mine. Everyone wanted to see the miracle for themselves. It didn't even seem to matter to most of them that she was... difficult. She was welcome. More than welcome. Again, I felt a little of that bitter jealousy. But that was silly. She was human. She represented hope. She belonged here. She would be here long after I was gone.

Lucky you, Mel whispered sarcastically.

Talking to Ian and Jamie about what had happened was not as difficult and painful as I'd imagined.

This was because they were, for different reasons, entirely clueless. Neither grasped that this new knowledge meant I would be leaving.

With Jamie, I understood why. More than anyone else, he had accepted me and Mel as the package deal we were. He was able, with his young, open mind, to grasp the reality of our dual personalities. He treated us like two people rather than one. Mel was so real, so present to him. The same way she was to me. He didn't miss her, because he had her. He didn't see the necessity of our separation.

I wasn't sure why Ian didn't understand. Was he too caught up in the potential? The changes this would mean for the human society here? They were all boggled by the idea that getting caught-the-end-was no longer a finality. There was a way to come back. It seemed natural to him that I had acted to save the Seeker; it was consistent with his idea of my personality. Maybe that was as far as he'd considered it.

Or maybe Ian just didn't have a chance to think it all through, to see the glaring eventuality, before he was distracted. Distracted and enraged.

"I should have killed him years ago," Ian ranted as we packed what we needed for our raid. My final raid; I tried not to dwell on that. "No, our mother should have drowned him at birth!"

"He's your brother."

"I don't know why you keep saying that. Are you trying to make me feel worse?"

Everyone was furious with Kyle. Jared's lips were welded into a tight line of rage, and Jeb stroked his gun more than usual.

Jeb had been excited, planning to join us on this landmark raid, his first since I'd come to live here. He was particularly keen to see the shuttle field up close. But now, with Kyle putting us all in danger, he felt he had to stay behind just in case. Not getting his way put Jeb in a foul mood.

"Stuck behind with that creature," he muttered to himself, rubbing the rifle barrel again-he wasn't getting any happier about the new member of his community. "Missin' all the fun." He spit on the floor.

We all knew where Kyle was. As soon as he'd grasped how the Seeker-worm had magically transformed into the Lacey-human in the night, he'd slipped out the back. I'd been expecting him to lead the party demanding the Seeker's death (I kept the cryotank always cradled in my arms; I slept lightly, my hand touching its smooth surface), but he was nowhere to be found, and Jeb had quashed the resistance easily in his absence.

Jared was the one to realize the jeep was gone. And Ian had been the one to link the two absences.

"He's gone after Jodi," Ian had groaned. "What else?"

Hope and despair. I had given them one, Kyle the other. Would he betray them all before they could even make use of the hope?

Jared and Jeb wanted to put off the raid until we knew if Kyle was successful-it would take him three days under the best circumstances, if his Jodi still lived in Oregon. If he could find her there.

There was another place, another cave we could evacuate to. A much smaller place, with no water, so we couldn't hide there long. They'd debated whether they should move everyone now or wait.

But I was in a hurry. I'd seen the way the others eyed the silver tank in my arms. I'd heard the whispers. The longer I kept the Seeker here, the better chance that someone would kill her. Having met Lacey, I'd begun to pity the Seeker. She deserved a mild, pleasant new life with the Flowers.

Ironically enough, Ian was the one who took my side and helped hurry the raid along. He still didn't see where this would lead.

But I was grateful that he helped me convince Jared there was time to make the raid and get back before a decision was made about Kyle. Grateful also that he was back to playing bodyguard. I knew I could trust Ian with the shiny cryotank more than anyone else. He was the only one I would let hold it when I needed my arms. He was the only one who could see, in the shape of that small container, a life to be protected. He could think of that shape as a friend, something that could be loved. He was the best ally of all. I was so grateful for Ian, and so grateful for the obliviousness that saved him, for the moment, from pain.

We had to be fast, in case Kyle ruined everything. We went to Phoenix again, to one of the many communities that spun out from the hub. There was a big shuttle field to the southeast, in a town called Mesa, with several Healing facilities nearby. That was what I wanted-I would give them as much as I could before I left. If we took a Healer, then we might be able to preserve the Healer's memory in the host body. Someone who understood all the medicines and their uses. Someone who knew the best ways to get to unattended stashes. Doc would love that. I could imagine all the questions he'd be dying to ask.

First the shuttle field.

I was sad that Jeb was missing this, but he'd have so many other chances in the future. Though it was dark, a long line of small snub-nosed shuttles drifted in to land while others took flight in an endless stream.

I drove the old van while the others rode in the back-Ian in charge of the tank, of course. I circled the field, staying clear of the busy local terminal. It was easy to spot the vast, sleek white vessels that left the planet. They did not depart with the frequency of the smaller ships. All I saw were docked, none preparing to leave immediately.

"Everything's labeled," I reported to the others, invisible in the dark back. "Now, this is important. Avoid ships to the Bats, and especially the See Weeds. The See Weeds are just one system over-it takes only a decade to make the round trip. That's much too short. The Flowers are the farthest, and the Dolphins, Bears, and Spiders all take at least a century to go one way. Only send tanks to those."

I drove slowly, close to the crafts.

"This will be easy. They've got all kinds of delivery vehicles out here, and we blend in. Oh! I can see a tank truck-it's just like the one we saw them unloading at the hospital, Jared. There's a man looking over the stacks... He's putting them onto a hover cart. He's going to load them..." I drove even slower, trying to get a good look. "Yes, onto this ship. Right into the open hatch. I'll circle back and make my move when he's in the ship." I pulled past, examining the scene in my mirrors. There was a lit sign beside the tube that connected the head of the ship to the terminal. I smiled as I read the words backward. This ship was going to the Flowers. It was meant to be.

I made a slow turn as the man disappeared into the hull of the ship.

"Get ready," I whispered as I pulled into the shadow made by the cylindrical wing of the next enormous ship over. I was only three or four yards from the tank truck. There were a few technicians working near the front of the Flower-bound vessel and others, farther away, out on the old runway. I would be just another figure in the night.

I cut the engine and hopped down from the driver's seat, trying to look casual, like I was only doing my job. I went around to the back of the van and opened the door a crack. The tank was right at the edge, the light on top glowing dull red, signifying that it was occupied. I lifted it carefully and closed the door.

I kept up an easy rolling pace as I walked to the open end of the truck. But my breathing sped up. This felt more dangerous than the hospital, and that worried me. Could I expect my humans to risk their lives this way?

I'll be there. I'll do it myself, just like you would. On the off chance you get your way, that is.

Thanks, Mel.

I had to force myself not to keep glancing over my shoulder at the open hatch where the man had disappeared. I placed the tank gently atop the closest column in the truck. The addition, one among hundreds, was not noticeable.

"Goodbye," I whispered. "Better luck with your next host."

I walked back to the van as slowly as I could stand to.

It was silent in the van as I reversed out from under the big ship. I started back the way we'd come, my heart hammering too fast. In my mirrors, the hatch remained empty. I didn't see the man emerge before the ship was out of sight.

Ian climbed into the passenger seat. "Doesn't look too hard."

“It was very good luck with the timing. You might have to wait longer for an opportunity next time.”

Ian reached over to take my hand. “You’re the good-luck charm.”

I didn’t answer.

“Do you feel better now that she’s safe?”

“Yes.”

I saw his head turn sharply as he heard the unexpected sound of a lie in my voice. I didn’t meet his gaze.

“Let’s go catch some Healers,” I muttered.

Ian was silent and thoughtful as we drove the short distance to the small Healing facility.

I’d thought the second task would be the challenge, the danger. The plan was that I would-if the conditions and numbers were right-try to lead a Healer or two out of the facility under the pretext that I had an injured friend in my van. An old trick, but one that would work only too well on the unsuspecting, trusting Healers.

As it turned out, I didn’t even have to go in. I pulled into the lot just as two middle-aged Healers, a man and a woman wearing purple scrubs, were getting into a car. Their shift over, they were heading home. The car was around the corner from the entrance. No one else was in sight.

Ian nodded tensely.

I stopped the van right behind their car. They looked up, surprised.

I opened my door and slid out. My voice was thick with tears, my face twisted with remorse, and that helped to fool them.

“My friend is in the back-I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

They responded with the instant concern I knew they would show. I hurried to open the back doors for them, and they followed right behind. Ian went around the other side. Jared was ready with the chloroform.

I didn’t watch.

It took just seconds. Jared hauled the unconscious bodies into the back, and Ian slammed the doors shut. Ian stared at my tear-swollen eyes for just a second, then took the driver’s seat.

I rode shotgun. He held my hand again.

“Sorry, Wanda. I know this is hard for you.”

“Yes.” He had no idea how hard, and for how many different reasons.

He squeezed my fingers. “But that went well, at least. You make an excellent charm.”

Too well. Both missions had gone too perfectly, too fast. Fate was rushing me.

He drove back toward the freeway. After a few minutes, I saw a bright, familiar sign in the distance. I took a deep breath and wiped my eyes clear.

“Ian, could you do me a favor?”

“Anything you want.”

“I want fast food.”

He laughed. “No problem.”

We switched seats in the parking lot, and I drove up to the ordering box.

“What do you want?” I asked Ian.

“Nothing. I’m getting a kick out of watching you do something for yourself. This has to be a first.”

I didn’t smile at his joke. To me, this was sort of a last meal-the final gift to the condemned. I wouldn’t leave the caves again.

“Jared, how about you?”

“Two of whatever you’re having.”

So I ordered three cheeseburgers, three bags of fries, and three strawberry shakes.

After I got my food, Ian and I switched again so I could eat while he drove.

“Eew,” he said, watching me dip a french fry into the shake.

“You should try it. It’s good.” I offered him a well-coated fry.

He shrugged and took it. He popped it into his mouth and chewed. “Interesting.”

I laughed. “Melanie thinks it’s gross, too.” That’s why I’d cultivated the habit in the beginning. It was funny now to think how I’d gone out of my way to annoy her.

I wasn’t really hungry. I’d just wanted some of the flavors I particularly remembered, one more time. Ian finished off half my burger when I was full.

We made it home without incident. We saw no sign of the Seekers’ surveillance. Perhaps they’d accepted the coincidence. Maybe they thought it inevitable-wander the desert alone long enough, and something bad would happen to you. We’d had a saying like that on the Mists Planet: Cross too many ice fields alone, and

wind up a claw beast's meal. That was a rough translation. It sounded better in Bear.

There was a large reception waiting for us.

I smiled halfheartedly at my friends: Trudy, Geoffrey, Heath, and Heidi. My true friends were dwindling. No Walter, no Wes. I didn't know where Lily was. This made me sad. Maybe I didn't want to live on this sad planet with so much death. Maybe nothingness was better.

It also made me sad, petty as it was, to see Lucina standing beside Lacey, with Reid and Violetta on the other side. They were talking animatedly, asking questions, it looked like. Lacey was holding Freedom on her hip. He didn't look especially thrilled about this, but he was happy enough being part of the adults' conversation that he didn't squirm down.

I'd never been allowed near the child, but Lacey was already one of them. Trusted.

We went straight to the south tunnel, Jared and Ian laboring under the weight of the Healers. Ian had the heavier one, the man, and sweat ran down his fair face. Jeb shooed the others back at the tunnel entrance and then followed us.

Doc was waiting for us in the hospital, rubbing his hands together absently, as if washing them.

Time continued to speed up. The brighter lamp was lit. The Healers were given No Pain and laid out facedown on the cots. Jared showed Ian how to activate the tanks. They held them ready, Ian wincing at the stunning cold. Doc stood over the female, scalpel in hand and medicines laid out in a row.

"Wanda?" he asked.

My heart squeezed inward painfully. "Do you swear, Doc? All of my terms? Do you promise me on your own life?"

"I do. I will meet all of your terms, Wanda. I swear it."

"Jared?"

"Yes. Absolutely no killing, ever."

"Ian?"

"I'll protect them with my own life, Wanda."

"Jeb?"

"It's my house. Anyone who can't abide by this agreement will have to get out."

I nodded, tears in my eyes. "Okay, then. Let's get it over with."

Doc, excited again, cut into the Healer until he could see the silver gleam. He set the scalpel quickly aside. "Now what?"

I put my hand on his.

"Trace up the back ridge. Can you feel that? Feel the shape of the segments. They get smaller toward the anterior section. Okay, at the end you should feel three small... stubby things. Do you feel what I'm talking about?"

"Yes," he breathed.

"Good. Those are the anterior antennae. Start there. Now, very gently, roll your finger under the body. Find the line of attachments. They'll feel tight, like wires."

He nodded.

I guided him a third of the way down, told him how to count if he wasn't sure. We didn't have time for counting with all the blood flowing free. I was sure the Healer's body, if she came around, would be able to help us-there must be something for that. I helped him find the biggest nodule.

"Now, rub softly in toward the body. Knead it lightly."

Doc's voice went up in pitch, turned a little panicky. "It's moving."

"That's good-it means you're doing it right. Give it time to retract. Wait till it rolls up a bit, then take it into your hand."

"Okay." His voice shook.

I reached toward Ian. "Give me your hand."

I felt Ian's hand wind around mine. I turned it over, curled his hand into a cup, and pulled it close to Doc's operation site.

"Give the soul to Ian-gently, please."

Ian would be the perfect assistant. When I was gone, who else would take such care with my little relatives?

Doc passed the soul into Ian's waiting hand, then turned at once to heal the human body.

Ian stared at the silver ribbon in his hand, his face full of wonder rather than revulsion. It felt warmer inside my chest while I watched his reaction.

my chest while I watched his reaction.

“It’s pretty,” he whispered, surprised. No matter how he felt about me, he’d been conditioned to expect a parasite, a centipede, a monster. Cleaning up severed bodies had not prepared him for the beauty here.

“I think so, too. Let it slide into your tank.”

Ian held the soul cupped in his hand for one more second, as if memorizing the sight and feel. Then, with delicate care, he let it glide into the cold.

Jared showed him how to latch the lid.

A weight fell off my shoulders.

It was done. It was too late to change my mind. This didn’t feel as horrible as I’d anticipated, because I felt sure these four humans would care for the souls just as I would. When I was gone.

“Look out!” Jeb suddenly shouted. The gun came up in his hands, pointed past us.

We whirled toward the danger, and Jared’s tank fell to the floor as he jumped toward the male Healer, who was on his knees on the cot, staring at us in shock. Ian had the presence of mind to hold on to his tank.

“Chloroform,” Jared shouted as he tackled the Healer, pinning him back down to the cot. But it was too late.

The Healer stared straight at me, his face childlike in his bewilderment. I knew why his eyes were on me—the lantern’s rays danced off both his eyes and mine, making diamond patterns on the wall.

“Why?” he asked me.

Then his face went blank, and his body slumped, unresisting, to the cot. Two trails of blood flowed from his nostrils.

“No!” I screamed, lurching to his inert form, knowing it was far too late. “No!”

The Host

CHAPTER 54

Forgotten

Elizabeth?” I asked. “Anne? Karen? What’s your name? C’mon. I know you know it.”

The Healer’s body was still limp on the cot. It had been a long time—how long, I wasn’t sure. Hours and hours. I hadn’t slept yet, though the sun was far up in the sky. Doc had climbed out onto the mountain to pull the tarps away, and the sun beamed brightly through the holes in the ceiling, hot on my skin. I’d moved the nameless woman so that her face would be out of the glare.

I touched her face now lightly, patting the soft brown hair, woven through with white strands, away from her face.

“Julie? Brittany? Angela? Patricia? Am I getting close? Talk to me. Please?”

Everyone but Doc—snoring quietly on a cot in the darkest corner of the hospital—had gone away hours ago. Some to bury the host body we’d lost. I cringed, thinking of his bewildered question, and the sudden way his face had gone slack.

Why? he’d asked me.

I so much wished that the soul had waited for an answer, so I could have tried to explain it to him. He might even have understood. After all, what was more important, in the end, than love? To a soul, wasn’t that the heart of everything? And love would have been my answer.

Maybe, if he’d waited, he would have seen the truth of that. If he’d really understood, I was sure he would have let the human body live.

The request would probably have made little sense to him, though. The body was his body, not a separate entity. His suicide was simply that to him, not a murder, too. Only one life had ended. And perhaps he was right.

At least the souls had survived. The light on his tank glowed dull red beside hers; I couldn’t ask for a greater evidence of commitment from my humans than this, the sparing of his life.

“Mary? Margaret? Susan? Jill?”

Though Doc slept and I was otherwise alone, I could feel the echo of the tension the others had left behind; it still hung in the air.

The tension lingered because the woman had not woken up when the chloroform wore off. She had not moved. She was still breathing—her heart was still beating—but she had not responded to any of Doc’s efforts to

the fact she was still breathing, her heart was still beating, but she had not responded to any of Doc's efforts to revive her.

Was it too late? Was she lost? Was she already gone? Just as dead as the male body?

Were all of them? Were there only a very few, like the Seeker's host, Lacey, and Melanie-the shouters, the resisters-who could be brought back? Was everyone else gone?

Was Lacey an anomaly? Would Melanie come back the way she had... or was even that in question?

I'm not lost. I'm here. But Mel's mental voice was defensive. She worried, too.

Yes, you are here. And you will stay here, I promised.

With a sigh, I returned to my efforts. My doomed efforts?

"I know you have a name," I told the woman. "Is it Rebecca? Alexandra? Olivia? Something simpler, maybe... Jane? Jean? Joan?"

It was better than nothing, I thought glumly. At least I'd given them a way to help themselves if they were ever taken. I could help the resisters, if no one else.

It didn't seem like enough.

"You're not giving me much to work with," I murmured. I took her hand in both of mine, chafed it softly. "It would really be nice if you would make an effort. My friends are going to be depressed enough. They could use some good news. Besides, with Kyle still gone... It will be hard to evacuate everyone without having to carry you around, too. I know you want to help. This is your family here, you know. These are your kind. They're very nice. Most of them. You'll like them."

The gently lined face was vacant with unconsciousness. She was quite pretty in an inconspicuous way-her features very symmetrical on her oval face. Forty-five, maybe a little younger, maybe a little older. It was hard to tell with no animation in the face.

"They need you," I went on, pleading now. "You can help them. You know so much that I never knew. Doc tries so hard. He deserves some help. He's a good man. You've been a Healer for a while now; some of that care for the well-being of others must have rubbed off on you. You'll like Doc, I think.

"Is your name Sarah? Emily? Kristin?"

I stroked her soft cheek, but there was no response, so I took her limp hand in mine again. I gazed at the blue sky through the holes in the high ceiling. My mind wandered.

"I wonder what they'll do if Kyle never comes back. How long will they hide? Will they have to find a new home somewhere else? There are so many of them.... It won't be easy. I wish I could help them, but even if I could stay, I don't have any answers.

"Maybe they'll get to stay here... somehow. Maybe Kyle won't mess up." I laughed humorlessly, thinking of the odds. Kyle wasn't a careful man. However, until that situation was resolved, I was needed. Maybe, if there were Seekers looking, they would need my infallible eyes. It might take a long time, and that made me feel warmer than the sun on my skin. Made me feel grateful that Kyle was impetuous and selfish. How long until we were sure we were safe?

"I wonder what it's like here when it gets cold. I can barely re-member feeling cold. And what if it rains? It has to rain here sometime, doesn't it? With all these holes in the roof, it must get really wet. Where does everyone sleep then, I wonder." I sighed. "Maybe I'll get to find out. Probably shouldn't bet on that, though. Aren't you curious at all? If you would wake up, you could get the answers. I'm curious. Maybe I'll ask Ian about it. It's funny to imagine things changing here.... I guess summer can't last forever."

Her fingers fluttered for one second in my hand.

It took me by surprise because my mind had wandered away from the woman on the cot, beginning to sink into the melancholy that was always conveniently near these days.

I stared down at her; there was no change-the hand in mine was limp, her face still vacant. Maybe I'd imagined the movement.

"Did I say something you were interested in? What was I talking about?" I thought quickly, watching her face. "Was it the rain? Or was it the idea of change? Change? You've got a lot of that ahead of you, don't you? You have to wake up first, though."

Her face was empty, her hand motionless.

"So you don't care for change. Can't say that I blame you. I don't want change to come, either. Are you like me? Do you wish the summer could last?"

If I hadn't been watching her face so closely, I wouldn't have seen the tiny flicker of her lids.

"You like summertime, do you?" I asked hopefully.

Her lips twitched.

“Summer?”

Her hand trembled.

“Is that your name-Summer? Summer? That’s a pretty name.”

Her hand tightened into a fist, and her lips parted.

“Come back, Summer. I know you can do it. Summer? Listen to me, Summer. Open your eyes, Summer.”

Her eyes blinked rapidly.

“Doc!” I called over my shoulder. “Doc, wake up!”

“Huh?”

“I think she’s coming around!” I turned back to the woman. “Keep it up, Summer. You can do this. I know it’s hard. Summer, Summer, Summer. Open your eyes.”

Her face grimaced-was she in pain?

“Bring the No Pain, Doc. Hurry.”

The woman squeezed my hand, and her eyes opened. They didn’t focus at first, just whirled around the bright cave. What a strange, unexpected sight this place must have been for her.

“You’re going to be all right, Summer. You’re going to be fine. Can you hear me, Summer?”

Her eyes wheeled back to me, the pupils constricting. She stared, absorbing my face. Then she cringed away from me, twisting on the cot to escape. A low, hoarse cry of panic broke through her lips.

“No, no, no,” she cried. “No more.”

“Doc!”

He was there, on the other side of the cot, like before, when we were operating.

“It’s okay, ma’am,” he assured her. “No one is going to hurt you here.”

The woman had her eyes squeezed shut, and she recoiled into the thin mattress.

“I think her name is Summer.”

He flashed a look at me and then made a face. “Eyes, Wanda,” he breathed.

I blinked and realized that the sun was on my face. “Oh.” I let the woman pull her hand free.

“Don’t, please,” the woman begged. “Not again.”

“Shh,” Doc murmured. “Summer? People call me Doc. No one’s going to do anything to you. You’re going to be fine.”

I eased away from them, into the shadows.

“Don’t call me that!” the woman sobbed. “That’s not my name! It’s hers, it’s hers! Don’t say it again!”

I’d gotten the wrong name.

Mel objected to the guilt that washed through me. It’s not your fault. Summer is a human name, too.

“Of course not,” Doc promised. “What is your name?”

“I-I-I don’t know!” she wailed. “What happened? Who was I? Don’t make me be someone else again.”

She tossed and thrashed on the cot.

“Calm down; it’s going to be okay, I promise. No one’s going to make you be anyone but you, and you’ll remember your name. It’s going to come back.”

“Who are you?” she demanded. “Who’s she? She’s like... like I was. I saw her eyes!”

“I’m Doc. And I’m human, just like you. See?” He moved his face into the light and blinked at her. “We’re both just ourselves. There are lots of humans here. They’ll be so happy to meet you.”

She cringed again. “Humans! I’m afraid of humans.”

“No, you’re not. The... person who used to be in your body was afraid of humans. She was a soul, remember that? And then remember before that, before she was there? You were human then, and you are again.”

“I can’t remember my name,” she told him in a panicked voice.

“I know. It’ll come back.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“I am.”

“I was... she was, too. A... Healer. Like a doctor. She was Summer Song. Who am I?”

“We’ll find out. I promise you that.”

I edged toward the exit. Trudy would be a good person to help Doc, or maybe Heidi. Someone with a calming face.

“She’s not human!” the woman whispered urgently to Doc, her eye caught by my movement.

“She’s a friend; don’t be afraid. She helped me bring you back.”

“Where is Summer Song? She was scared. There were humans....”

I ducked out the door while she was distracted.

I heard Doc answer the question behind me. “She’s going to a new planet. Do you remember where she was before she came here?”

I could guess what her answer would be from the name.

“She was... a Bat? She could fly.... She could sing.... I remember... but it was... not here. Where am I?”

I hurried down the hall to find help for Doc. I was surprised when I saw the light of the great cavern ahead-surprised because it was so quiet. Usually you could hear voices before you saw the light. It was the middle of the day. There should have been someone in the big garden room, if only crossing through.

I walked out into the bright noon light, and the giant space was empty.

The fresh tendrils of the cantaloupe vines were dark green, darker than the dry earth they sprang from. The earth was too dry-the irrigating barrel stood ready to fix that, the hoses laid out along the furrows. But no one manned the crude machine. It sat abandoned on the side of the field.

I stood very still, trying to hear something. The huge cavern was silent, and the silence was ominous. Where was everyone?

Had they evacuated without me? A pang of fear and hurt shot through me. But they wouldn’t have left without Doc, of course. They would never leave Doc. I wanted to dart back through the long tunnel to make sure Doc had not disappeared, too.

They wouldn’t go without us, either, silly. Jared and Jamie and Ian wouldn’t leave us behind.

You’re right. You’re right. Let’s... check the kitchen?

I jogged down the silent corridor, getting more anxious as the silence continued. Maybe it was my imagination, and the loud thumping of my pulse in my ears. Of course there must be something to hear. If I could calm down and slow my breathing, I’d be able to hear voices.

But I reached the kitchen and it was empty, too. Empty of people. On the tables, half-eaten lunches had been abandoned. Peanut butter on the last of the soft bread. Apples and warm cans of soda.

My stomach reminded me that I hadn’t eaten at all today, but I barely noted the twist of hunger. The panic was so much stronger.

What if... what if we didn’t evacuate soon enough?

No! Mel gasped. No, we would have heard something! Someone would have... or there would be... They’d still be here, looking for us. They wouldn’t give up until they’d checked everywhere. So that can’t be it.

Unless they’re looking for us now.

I spun back toward the door, my eyes darting through the shadows.

I had to go warn Doc. We had to get out of here if we were the last two.

No! They can’t be gone! Jamie, Jared... Their faces were so clear, as if they were etched onto the insides of my eyelids.

And Ian’s face, as I added my own pictures to hers. Jeb, Trudy, Lily, Heath, Geoffrey. We’ll get them back, I vowed. We’ll hunt them down one by one and steal them back! I won’t let them take my family!

If I’d had any doubts where I stood, this moment would have erased them. I’d never felt so fierce in all my lives. My teeth clenched tight, snapping together audibly.

And then the noise, the babble of voices I’d been so anxiously straining to hear, echoed down the hall to us and made my breath catch. I slid silently to the wall and pressed myself into the shadow there, listening.

The big garden. You can hear it in the echoes.

Sounds like a large group.

Yes. But yours or mine?

Ours or theirs, she corrected.

I crept down the hall, keeping to the darkest shadows. We could hear the voices more clearly now, and some of them were familiar. Did that mean anything? How long would it take trained Seekers to perform an insertion?

And then, as I reached the very mouth of the great cave, the sounds became even clearer, and relief washed through me-because the babble of voices was just the same as it had been my very first day here. Murderously angry.

They had to be human voices.

Kyle must be back.

Relief warred with pain as I hurried into the bright sunlight to see what was going on. Relief because my

numans were safe. And pain because if Kyle was already safely back, then...

You're still needed, Wanda. So much more than I am.

I'm sure I could find excuses forever, Mel. There will always be some reason.

Then stay.

With you as my prisoner?

We stopped arguing as we assessed the commotion in the cavern.

Kyle was back-the easiest one to spot, the tallest in the crowd, the only one facing me. He was pinned against the far wall by the mob. Though he was the cause of the angry noise, he was not the source of it. His face was conciliatory, pleading. He held his arms out to the sides, palms back, as if there was something behind him he was trying to protect.

"Just calm down, okay?" His deep voice carried over the cacophony. "Back off, Jared, you're scaring her!"

A flash of black hair behind his elbow-an unfamiliar face, with wide, terrified black eyes, peeked around at the crowd.

Jared was closest to Kyle. I could see that the back of his neck was bright red. Jamie clung to one of his arms, holding him back. Ian was on his other side, his arms crossed in front of him, the muscles in his shoulders tight with strain. Behind them, every other human but Doc and Jeb was massed in an angry throng. They surged behind Jared and Ian, asking loud, angry questions.

"What were you thinking?"

"How dare you?"

"Why'd you come back at all?"

Jeb was in the back corner, just watching.

Sharon's brilliant hair caught my eye. I was surprised to see her, with Maggie, right in the center of the crowd. They'd both been so little a part of life here ever since Doc and I had healed Jamie. Never in the middle of things.

It's the fight, Mel guessed. They weren't comfortable with happiness, but they're at home with fury.

I thought she was probably right. How... disturbing.

I heard a shrill voice throwing out some of the angry questions and realized that Lacey was part of the crowd, too.

"Wanda?" Kyle's voice carried across the noise again, and I looked up to see his deep blue eyes locked on me. "There you are! Could you please come and give me a little help here?"

The Host

CHAPTER 55

Attached

Jeb cleared a path for me, pushing people aside with his rifle as though they were sheep and the gun a shepherd's staff.

"That's enough," he growled at those who complained. "You'll get a chance to dress 'im down later. We all will. Let's get this sorted out first, okay? Let me through."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Sharon and Maggie fall to the back of the crowd, melting away from the reinstatement of reason. Away from my involvement, really, more than anything else. Both with jaws locked, they continued to glare at Kyle.

Jared and Ian were the last two Jeb shoved aside. I brushed both of their arms as I passed, hoping to help calm them.

"Okay, Kyle," Jeb said, smacking the barrel of the gun against his palm. "Don't try to excuse yourself, 'cause there ain't no excuse. I'm plain torn between kickin' ya out and shootin' ya now."

The little face, pale under the deep tan of her skin, peeped around Kyle's elbow again with a swish of long, curly black hair. The girl's mouth was hanging open in horror, her dark eyes frantic. I thought I could see a faint sheen to those eyes, a hint of silver behind the black.

"But right now, let's calm everybody down." Jeb turned around, gun held low across his body, and suddenly it was as if he were guarding Kyle and the little face behind him. He glared at the mob. "Kyle's got a guest, and you're scarin' the snot out of her, people. I think you can all dig up some better manners than that. Now, all of you clear out and get to work on something useful. My centelones are dying. Somebody do

know, all of you clear out and get to work on something useful. My cantaloupes are dying. Somebody do something about that, hear?"

He waited until the muttering crowd slowly dispersed. Now that I could see their faces, I could tell that they were already getting over it, most of them, anyway. This wasn't so bad, not after what they'd been fearing the last few days. Yes, Kyle was a self-absorbed idiot, their faces seemed to say, but at least he was back, no harm done. No evacuation, no danger of the Seekers. No more than usual, anyway. He'd brought another worm back, but then, weren't the caves full of them these days?

It just wasn't as shocking as it used to be.

Many went back toward their interrupted lunch, others returned to the irrigation barrel, others to their rooms. Soon only Jared, Ian, and Jamie were left beside me. Jeb looked at these three with a cross expression; his mouth opened, but before he could order them away again, Ian took my hand, and then Jamie grabbed the other. I felt another hand on my wrist, just above Jamie's. Jared.

Jeb rolled his eyes at the way they'd tethered themselves to me to avoid expulsion, and then turned his back on us.

"Thanks, Jeb," Kyle said.

"Shut the hell up, Kyle. Just keep your fat mouth shut. I'm dead serious about shooting you, you worthless maggot."

There was a weak whimper from behind Kyle.

"Okay, Jeb. But could you save the death threats till we're alone? She's terrified enough. You remember how that kind of stuff freaks Wanda out." Kyle smiled at me—I felt shock cross my face in reaction—and then he turned to the girl hiding behind him with the gentlest expression I'd ever seen on his face. "See, Sunny? This is Wanda, the one I told you about. She'll help us—she won't let anyone hurt you, just like me."

The girl—or was she a woman? She was tiny, but there was a subtle curviness to her shape that suggested more maturity than her size—stared at me, her eyes huge with fright. Kyle put his arms around her waist, and she let him pull her into his side. She clung there, as if he were an anchor, her pillar of safety.

"Kyle's right." Never thought I'd say that. "I won't let anyone hurt you. Your name is Sunny?" I asked softly.

The woman's eyes flashed up to Kyle's face.

"It's okay. You don't have to be afraid of Wanda. She's just like you." He turned to me. "Her real name is longer—something about ice."

"Sunlight Passing Through the Ice," she whispered to me.

I saw Jeb's eyes brighten with his unquenchable curiosity.

"She doesn't mind being called just Sunny, though. She said it was fine," Kyle assured me.

Sunny nodded. Her eyes flickered from my face to Kyle's and back again. The other men were totally silent and totally motionless. The little circle of calm soothed her a bit, I could see. She must have been able to feel the change in the atmosphere. There was no hostility toward her, none at all.

"I was a Bear, too, Sunny," I told her, trying to make her feel just a little more comfortable. "They called me Lives in the Stars, then. Wanderer, here."

"Lives in the Stars," she whispered, her eyes somehow, impossibly, getting wider. "Rides the Beast."

I suppressed a groan. "You lived in the second crystal city, I guess."

"Yes. I heard the story so many times..."

"Did you like being a Bear, Sunny?" I asked quickly. I didn't really want to get into my history right now. "Were you happy there?"

Her face crumpled at my questions; her eyes locked onto Kyle's face and filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," I apologized at once, looking to Kyle, too, for an explanation.

He patted her arm. "Don't be afraid. You won't be hurt. I promised."

I could barely hear her answering whisper. "But I like it here. I want to stay."

Her words brought a thick lump to my throat.

"I know, Sunny. I know." Kyle put his hand on the back of her head and, in a gesture so tender it made my eyes smart, held her face against his chest.

Jeb cleared his throat, and Sunny started and cringed. It was easy to imagine the frayed state her nerves must be in. Souls were not designed to handle violence and terror.

I remembered long ago when Jared had interrogated me; he'd asked if I was like other souls. I was not, nor was the other soul they'd dealt with, my Seeker. Sunny, however, seemed to embody the essence of my gentle, timid species: we were powerful only in great numbers.

"Sorry, Sunny," Jeb said. "Didn't mean to scare you, there. Maybe we ought to get out of here, though." His eyes swept around the cave, where a few people lingered by the exits, gawking at us. He stared hard at Reid and Lucina, and they ducked down the corridor toward the kitchen. "Probably ought to git along to Doc," Jeb continued with a sigh, giving the frightened little woman a wistful glance. I guessed he was sad to be missing out on new stories.

"Right," Kyle said. He kept his arm firmly around Sunny's tiny waist and pulled her with him toward the southern tunnel.

I followed right behind, towing the others who still adhered to me.

Jeb paused, and we all stopped with him. He jabbed the butt of his gun into Jamie's hip.

"Ain't you got school, kid?"

"Aw, Uncle Jeb, please? Please? I don't want to miss -"

"Get your behind to class."

Jamie turned his hurt eyes on me, but Jeb was absolutely right. This was nothing I wanted Jamie to see. I shook my head at him.

"Could you get Trudy on your way?" I asked. "Doc needs her."

Jamie's shoulders slumped, and he pulled his hand out of mine. Jared's slid down from my wrist to take its place.

"I miss everything," Jamie moaned as he turned back the other way.

"Thanks, Jeb," I whispered when Jamie was out of hearing.

"Yep."

The long tunnel seemed blacker than before because I could feel the fear radiating from the woman ahead of me.

"It's okay," Kyle murmured to her. "There's nothing that's going to hurt you, and I'm here."

I wondered who this strange man was, the one who had come back in Kyle's place. Had they checked his eyes? I couldn't believe he'd carried all this gentleness around inside his big angry body.

It must have been having Jodi back, being so close to what he wanted. Even knowing that this was his Jodi's body, I was surprised that he could expend so much kindness for the soul inside it. I would have thought such compassion was beyond him.

"How's the Healer?" Jared asked me.

"She woke up, just before I came to find you," I said.

I heard more than one sigh of relief in the darkness.

"She's disoriented, though, and very frightened," I warned them all. "She can't remember her name. Doc's working with her. She's going to be even more scared when she sees all of you. Try to be quiet and move slowly, okay?"

"Yes, yes," the voices whispered in the darkness.

"And, Jeb, do you think you could lose the gun? She's a little afraid of humans still."

"Uh-okay," Jeb answered.

"Afraid of humans?" Kyle murmured.

"We're the bad guys," Ian reminded him, squeezing my hand.

I squeezed it back, glad for the warmth of his touch, the pressure of his fingers.

How much longer would I have the feeling of a hand warm around mine? When was the last time I would walk down this tunnel? Was it this time?

No. Not yet, Mel whispered.

I was suddenly trembling. Ian's hand tightened again, and so did Jared's.

We walked in silence for a few moments.

"Kyle?" Sunny's timid voice asked.

"Yes?"

"I don't want to go back to the Bears."

"You don't have to. You can go somewhere else."

"But I can't stay here?"

"No. I'm sorry, Sunny."

There was a little hitch in her breathing. I was glad it was dark. No one could see the tears that started rolling down my face. I had no free hand to wipe them away, so I let them fall onto my shirt.

We finally reached the end of the tunnel. The sunlight streamed from the mouth of the hospital, reflecting

off the dust motes dancing in the air. I could hear Doc murmuring inside.

"That's very good," he was saying. "Keep thinking of details. You know your old address-your name can't be far behind, eh? How does this feel? Not tender?"

"Careful," I whispered.

Kyle paused at the edge of the arch, Sunny still clinging to his side, and motioned for me to go first.

I took a deep breath and walked slowly into Doc's place. I announced my presence in a low, even voice. "Hello."

The Healer's host started and gasped out a little shriek.

"Just me again," I said reassuringly.

"It's Wanda," Doc reminded her.

The woman was sitting up now, and Doc was sitting beside her with his hand on her arm.

"That's the soul," the woman whispered anxiously to Doc.

"Yes, but she's a friend."

The woman eyed me doubtfully.

"Doc? You've got a few more visitors. Is that okay?"

Doc looked at the woman. "These are all friends, all right? More of the humans who live here with me. None of them would ever dream of hurting you. Can they come in?"

The woman hesitated, then nodded cautiously. "Okay," she whispered.

"This is Ian," I said, motioning him forward. "And Jared, and Jeb." One by one, they walked into the room and stood beside me. "And this is Kyle and... uh, Sunny."

Doc's eyes bugged wide as Kyle, Sunny attached to his side, entered the room.

"Are there any more?" the woman whispered.

Doc cleared his throat, trying to compose himself. "Yes. There are a lot of people who live here. All... well, mostly humans," he added, staring at Sunny.

"Trudy is on her way," I told Doc. "Maybe Trudy could..." I glanced at Sunny and Kyle. "... find a room for... her to rest in?"

Doc nodded, still wide-eyed. "That might be a good idea."

"Who's Trudy?" the woman whispered.

"She's very nice. She'll take care of you."

"Is she human, or is she like that one?" She nodded toward me.

"She's human."

This seemed to ease the woman's mind.

"Oh," Sunny gasped behind me.

I turned to see her staring at the cryotanks that held the Healers. They were standing in the middle of Doc's desk, the lights on top glowing muted red. On the floor in front of the desk, the seven remaining empty tanks were piled in an untidy heap.

Tears sprang to Sunny's eyes again, and she buried her face against Kyle's chest.

"I don't want to go! I want to stay with you," she moaned to the big man she seemed to trust so completely.

"I know, Sunny. I'm sorry."

Sunny broke down into sobs.

I blinked fast, trying to keep the tears from my own eyes. I crossed the small space to where Sunny stood, and stroked her springy black hair.

"I need to talk to her for a minute, Kyle," I murmured.

He nodded, his face troubled, and pulled the clinging girl from his side.

"No, no," she begged.

"It's okay," I promised. "He's not going anywhere. I just want to ask you a few questions."

Kyle turned her to face me, and her arms locked around me. I pulled her to the far corner of the room, as far from the nameless woman as I could get. I didn't want our conversation to confuse or frighten the Healer's host any more than she already was. Kyle followed, never more than a few inches away. We sat on the floor, facing the wall.

"Jeez," Kyle murmured. "I didn't think it would be like this. This really sucks."

"How did you find her? And catch her?" I asked. The sobbing girl didn't react as I questioned him; she just kept crying on my shoulder. "What happened? Why is she like this?"

"Well, I thought she might be in Las Vegas. I went there first, before I went on to Portland. See, Jodi was

really close to her mother, and that's where Doris lived. I thought, seeing how you were about Jared and the kid, that maybe she would go there, even when she wasn't Jodi. And I was right. They were all there at the same old house, Doris's house: Doris, and her husband, Warren-they had other names, but I didn't hear them clearly-and Sunny. I watched them all day, until it was nighttime. Sunny was in Jodi's old room, alone. I snuck in after they'd all been asleep for hours. I yanked Sunny up, threw her over my shoulder, and jumped out the window. I thought she was going to start screaming, so I was really booking it back to the jeep. Then I was afraid because she didn't start screaming. She was just so quiet! I was afraid she had... you know. Like that guy we caught once."

I winced-I had a more recent memory.

"So I pulled her off my shoulder, and she was alive, just staring up at me, all wide-eyed. Still not screaming. I carried her back to the jeep. I'd been planning to tie her up, but... she didn't look that upset. She wasn't trying to get away, at least. So I just buckled her in and started driving.

"She just stared at me for a long time, and then finally she said, 'You're Kyle,' and I said, 'Yeah, who are you?' and she told me her name. What is it again?"

"Sunlight Passing Through the Ice," Sunny whispered brokenly. "I like Sunny, though. It's nice."

"Anyway," Kyle went on after clearing his throat. "She didn't mind talking to me at all. She wasn't afraid like I'd thought she'd be. So we talked." He was quiet for a moment. "She was happy to see me."

"I used to dream about him all the time," Sunny whispered to me. "Every night. I kept hoping the Seekers would find him; I missed him so much.... When I saw him, I thought it was the old dream again."

I swallowed loudly.

Kyle reached across me to lay his hand on her cheek.

"She's a good kid, Wanda. Can't we send her someplace really nice?"

"That's what I wanted to ask her about. Where have you lived, Sunny?"

I was vaguely aware of the subdued voices of the others, greeting Trudy's arrival. We had our backs to them. I wanted to see what was going on, but I was also glad not to have the distraction. I tried to concentrate on the crying soul.

"Just here and with the Bears. I was there five life terms. But I like it better here. I haven't had even a quarter of a life term here!"

"I know. Believe me, I understand. Is there anywhere else, though, that you've ever wanted to go? The Flowers, maybe? It's nice there; I've been."

"I don't want to be a plant," she mumbled into my shoulder.

"The Spiders..." I began, but then let my voice trail off. The Spiders were not the right place for Sunny.

"I'm tired of cold. And I like colors."

"I know." I sighed. "I haven't been a Dolphin, but I hear it's nice there. Color, mobility, family..."

"They're all so far away. By the time I got anywhere, Kyle would be... He'd be..." She hiccuped and then started crying again.

"Don't you have any other choices?" Kyle asked anxiously. "Aren't there a lot more places out there?"

I could hear Trudy talking to the Healer's host, but I tuned out the words. Let the humans take care of their own for the moment.

"Not that the off-world ships are going to," I told him, shaking my head. "There are lots of worlds, but only a few, mostly the newer ones, are still open for settling. And I'm sorry, Sunny, but I have to send you far away. The Seekers want to find my friends here, and they'd bring you back if they could, so you could show them the way."

"I don't even know the way," she sobbed. My shoulder was drenched with her tears. "He covered my eyes."

Kyle looked at me as if I could produce some kind of miracle to make this all work out perfectly. Like the medicine I'd provided, some kind of magic. But I knew that I was out of magic, out of happy endings-for the soul half of the equation, at least.

I stared back hopelessly at Kyle. "It's just the Bears, the Flowers, and the Dolphins," I told him. "I won't send her to the Fire Planet."

The small woman shuddered at the name.

"Don't worry, Sunny. You'll like the Dolphins. They'll be nice. Of course they'll be nice."

She sobbed harder.

I sighed and moved on.

"Sunny, I need to talk to you about the Bears."

Sunny, I need to ask you about Joa.

Kyle stiffened beside me.

“What about her?” Sunny mumbled.

“Is she... is she in there with you? Can you hear her?”

Sunny sniffed and looked up at me. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Does she ever talk to you? Are you ever aware of her thoughts?”

“My... body’s? Her thoughts? She doesn’t have any. I’m here now.”

I nodded slowly.

“Is that bad?” Kyle whispered.

“I don’t know enough about it to tell. It’s probably not good, though.”

Kyle’s eyes tightened.

“How long have you been here, Sunny?”

She frowned, thinking. “How long is it, Kyle? Five years? Six? You disappeared before I came home.”

“Six,” he said.

“And how old are you?” I asked her.

“I’m twenty-seven.”

That surprised me—she was such a little thing, so young looking. I couldn’t believe she was six years older than Melanie.

“Why does that matter?” Kyle asked.

“I’m not sure. It just seems like the more time someone spent as a human before they became a soul, the better chance they might have at... making a recovery. The greater the percentage of their life they spent human, the more memories they have, the more connections, the more years being called by the right name... I don’t know.”

“Is twenty-one years enough?” he asked, his voice desperate.

“I guess we’ll find out.”

“It’s not fair!” Sunny wailed. “Why do you get to stay? Why can’t I stay, if you can?”

I had to swallow hard. “That wouldn’t be fair, would it? But I don’t get to stay, Sunny. I have to go, too. And soon. Maybe we’ll leave together.” Perhaps she’d be happier if she thought I was going to the Dolphins with her. By the time she knew otherwise, Sunny would have a different host with different emotions and no tie to this human beside me. Maybe. Anyway, it would be too late. “I have to go, Sunny, just like you. I have to give my body back, too.”

And then, flat and hard from right behind us, Ian’s voice broke the quiet like the crack of a whip.

“What?”

The Host

CHAPTER 56

Welded

Ian glared down at the three of us with such fury that Sunny shivered in terror. It was an odd thing—as if Kyle and Ian had switched faces. Except Ian’s face was still perfect, unbroken. Beautiful, even though it was enraged.

“Ian?” Kyle asked, bewildered. “What’s the problem?”

Ian spoke from between his locked teeth. “Wanda,” he growled, and held his hand out. It looked as if he was having a hard time keeping that hand open, not clenching it into a fist.

Uh-oh, Mel thought.

Misery swept through me. I didn’t want to say goodbye to Ian, and now I would have to. Of course I had to. I would be wrong to sneak out in the night like a thief and leave all my goodbyes to Melanie.

Ian, tired of waiting, grabbed my arm and hauled me up from the floor. When Sunny seemed like she was coming along, too, still joined to my side, Ian shook me until she fell off.

“What is with you?” Kyle demanded.

Ian hauled his knee back and smashed his foot hard into Kyle’s face.

“Ian!” I protested.

Sunny threw herself in front of Kyle, who was holding his hand to his nose and struggling to get to his feet.

gunny threw herself in front of Kyle—who was holding his hand to his nose and struggling to get to his feet—and tried to shield him with her tiny body. This knocked him off balance, back to the floor, and he groaned.

“C’mon,” Ian snarled, dragging me away from them without a backward glance.

“Ian -“

He wrenched me roughly along, making it impossible for me to speak. That was fine. I had no idea what to say.

I saw everyone’s startled face flash by in a blur. I was worried he was going to upset the unnamed woman. She wasn’t used to anger and violence.

And then we jerked to a stop. Jared was blocking the exit.

“Have you lost your mind, Ian?” he asked, shocked and outraged. “What are you doing to her?”

“Did you know about this?” Ian shouted back, shoving me toward Jared and shaking me at him. Behind us, a whimper. He was scaring them.

“You’re going to hurt her!”

“Do you know what she’s planning?” Ian roared.

Jared stared at Ian, his face suddenly closed off. He didn’t answer.

That was answer enough for Ian.

Ian’s fist struck Jared so fast that I missed the blow—I just felt the lurch in his body and saw Jared reel back into the dark hall.

“Ian, stop,” I begged.

“You stop,” he growled back at me.

He yanked me through the arch into the tunnel, then pulled me north. I had to almost run to keep up with his longer stride.

“O’Shea!” Jared shouted after us.

“I’m going to hurt her?” Ian roared back over his shoulder, not breaking pace. “I am? You hypocritical swine!”

There was nothing but silence and blackness behind us now. I stumbled in the dark, trying to keep up.

It was then that I began to feel the throbbing from Ian’s grip. His hand was tight as a tourniquet around my upper arm, his long fingers making the circle easily and then overlapping. My hand was going numb.

He jerked me along faster, and my breath caught in a moan, almost a cry of pain.

The sound made Ian stumble to a stop. His breathing was hoarse in the darkness.

“Ian, Ian, I...” I choked, unable to finish. I didn’t know what to say, picturing his furious face.

His arms caught me up abruptly, yanking my feet out from under me and then catching my shoulders before I could fall. He started running forward again, carrying me now. His hands were not rough and angry like before; he cradled me against his chest.

He ran right through the big plaza, ignoring the surprised and even suspicious faces. There was too much that was unfamiliar and uncomfortable going on in the caves right now. The humans here—Violetta, Geoffrey, Andy, Paige, Aaron, Brandt, and more I couldn’t see well as we jolted past—were skittish. It disturbed them to see Ian running headlong through them, face twisted with rage, with me in his arms.

And then they were behind us. He didn’t pause until we reached the doors leaning against his and Kyle’s room. He kicked the red one out of the way—it hit the stone floor with an echoing boom—and dropped me onto the mattress on the floor.

Ian stood above me, his chest heaving with exertion and fury. For a second he turned away and put the door back in place with one swift wrench. And then he was glowering again.

I took a deep breath and rolled up onto my knees, holding my hands out, palms up, wishing that some magic would appear in them. Something I could give him, something I could say. But my hands were empty.

“You. Are. Not. Leaving. Me.” His eyes blazed—burning brighter than I had ever seen them, blue flames.

“Ian,” I whispered. “You have to see that... that I can’t stay. You must see that.”

“No!” he shouted at me.

I cringed back, and, abruptly, Ian crumpled forward, falling to his knees, falling into me. He buried his head in my stomach, and his arms locked around my waist. He was shaking, shaking hard, and loud, desperate sobs were breaking out of his chest.

“No, Ian, no,” I begged. This was so much worse than his anger. “Don’t, please. Please, don’t.”

“Wanda,” he moaned.

“Ian, please. Don’t feel this way. Don’t. I’m so sorry. Please.”

I was crvng. too. shaking. too. though that might have been him shaking me.

“You can’t leave.”

“I have to, I have to,” I sobbed.

And then we cried wordlessly for a long time.

His tears dried before mine. Eventually, he straightened up and pulled me into his arms again. He waited until I was able to speak.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “I was mean.”

“No, no. I’m sorry. I should have told you, when you didn’t guess. I just... I couldn’t. I didn’t want to tell you-to hurt you-to hurt me. It was selfish.”

“We need to talk about this, Wanda. It’s not a done deal. It can’t be.”

“It is.”

He shook his head, clenching his teeth. “How long? How long have you been planning this?”

“Since the Seeker,” I whispered.

He nodded, seeming to expect this answer. “And you thought that you had to give up your secret to save her. I can understand that. But that doesn’t mean you have to go anywhere. Just because Doc knows now... that doesn’t mean anything. If I’d thought for one minute that it did, that one action equaled the other, I wouldn’t have stood there and let you show him. No one is going to force you to lie down on his blasted gurney! I’ll break his hands if he tries to touch you!”

“Ian, please.”

“They can’t make you, Wanda! Do you hear me?” He was shouting again.

“No one is making me. I didn’t show Doc how to do the separation so that I could save the Seeker,” I whispered. “The Seeker’s being here just made me have to decide... faster. I did it to save Mel, Ian.”

His nostrils flared, and he said nothing.

“She’s trapped in here, Ian. It’s like a prison-worse than that; I can’t even describe it. She’s like a ghost. And I can free her. I can give her herself back.”

“You deserve a life, too, Wanda. You deserve to stay.”

“But I love her, Ian.”

He closed his eyes, and his pale lips went dead white.

“But I love you,” he whispered. “Doesn’t that matter?”

“Of course it matters. So much. Can’t you see? That only makes it more... necessary.”

His eyes flashed open. “Is it so unbearable to have me love you? Is that it? I can keep my mouth shut, Wanda. I won’t say it again. You can be with Jared, if that’s what you want. Just stay.”

“No, Ian!” I took his face between my hands-his skin felt hard, strained tight over the bones. “No. I-I love you, too. Me, the little silver worm in the back of her head. But my body doesn’t love you. It can’t love you. I can never love you in this body, Ian. It pulls me in two. It’s unbearable.”

I could have borne it. But watching him suffer because of my body’s limitations? Not that.

He closed his eyes again. His thick black lashes were wet with tears. I could see them glisten.

Oh, go ahead, Mel sighed. Do whatever you need to. I’ll... step into the other room, she added dryly.

Thanks.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled myself closer to him until my lips touched his.

He curled his arms around me, pulling me tighter against his chest. Our lips moved together, fusing as if they would never divide, as if separation was not the inevitable thing it was, and I could taste the salt of our tears. His and mine.

Something began to change.

When Melanie’s body touched Jared’s body, it was like a wildfire-a fast burn that raced across the surface of the desert and consumed everything in its path.

With Ian it was different, so very different, because Melanie didn’t love him the way I did. So when he touched me, it was deeper and slower than the wildfire, like the flow of molten rock far beneath the surface of the earth. Too deep to feel the heat of it, but it moved inexorably, changing the very foundations of the world with its advance.

My unwilling body was a fog between us-a thick curtain, but gauzy enough that I could see through it, could see what was happening.

It changed me, not her. It was almost a metallurgical process deep inside the core of who I was, something that had already begun, was already nearly forged. But this long, unbroken kiss finished it, searing and sharp edged-it shoved this new creation, all hissing, into the cold water that made it hard and final. Unbreakable.

And I started to cry again, realizing that it must be changing him, too, this man who was kind enough to be a soul but strong as only a human could be.

He moved his lips to my eyes, but it was too late. It was done. “Don’t cry, Wanda. Don’t cry. You’re staying with me.”

“Eight full lives,” I whispered against his jaw, my voice breaking. “Eight full lives and I never found anyone I would stay on a planet for, anyone I would follow when they left. I never found a partner. Why now? Why you? You’re not of my species. How can you be my partner?”

“It’s a strange universe,” he murmured.

“It’s not fair,” I complained, echoing Sunny’s words. It wasn’t fair. How could I find this, find love-now, in this eleventh hour-and have to leave it? Was it fair that my soul and body couldn’t reconcile? Was it fair that I had to love Melanie, too?

Was it fair that Ian would suffer? He deserved happiness if anyone did. It wasn’t fair or right or even... sane. How could I do this to him?

“I love you,” I whispered.

“Don’t say that like you’re saying goodbye.”

But I had to. “I, the soul called Wanderer, love you, human Ian. And that will never change, no matter what I might become.” I worded it carefully, so that there would be no lie in my voice. “If I were a Dolphin or a Bear or a Flower, it wouldn’t matter. I would always love you, always remember you. You will be my only partner.”

His arms stiffened, then constricted tighter around me, and I could feel the anger in them again. It was hard to breathe.

“You’re not wandering off anywhere. You’re staying here.”

“Ian -“

But his voice was brusque now-angry, but also businesslike. “This isn’t just for me. You’re a part of this community, and you aren’t getting kicked out without discussion. You are far too important to us all-even to the ones who would never admit it. We need you.”

“No one’s kicking me out, Ian.”

“No. Not even you yourself, Wanderer.”

He kissed me again, his mouth rougher with the return of the anger. His hand curled into a fist around my hair, and he pulled my face an inch away from his.

“Good or bad?” he demanded.

“Good.”

“That’s what I thought.” And his voice was a growl.

He kissed me again. His arms were so tight around my ribs, his mouth so fierce against mine, that I was soon dizzy and gasping for air. He loosened his arms a little then and let his lips slide to my ear.

“Let’s go.”

“Where? Where are we going?” I wasn’t going anywhere, I knew that. And yet how my heart pounded when I thought of going away, somewhere, anywhere, with Ian. My Ian. He was mine, the way Jared never would be. The way this body could never be his.

“Don’t give me any trouble about this, Wanderer. I’m half out of my mind.” He pulled us both to our feet.

“Where?” I insisted.

“You’re going down the eastern tunnel, past the field, to the end.”

“The game room?”

“Yes. And then you are going to wait there until I get the rest of them.”

“Why?” His words sounded crazy to me. Did he want to play a game? To ease the tension again?

“Because this will be discussed. I’m calling a tribunal, Wanderer, and you are going to abide by our decision.”

The Host

CHAPTER 57

It was a small tribunal this time, not like the trial for Kyle's life. Ian brought only Jeb, Doc, and Jared. He knew without having to be told that Jamie must not be allowed anywhere near these proceedings.

Melanie would have to give that goodbye for me. I couldn't face that, not with Jamie. I didn't care if it was cowardly of me. I wouldn't do it.

Just one blue lamp, one dim circle of light on the stone floor. We sat on the edge of the ring of light; I was alone, the four men facing me. Jeb had even brought his gun-as if it were a gavel and would make this more official.

The smell of sulfur brought back the painful days of my mourning; there were some memories that I would not regret losing when I was gone.

"How is she?" I asked Doc urgently as they settled in, before they could get started. This tribunal was a waste of my small store of time. I was worried about more important things.

"Which one?" he responded in a weary voice.

I stared at him for a few seconds, and then my eyes grew wide. "Sunny's gone? Already?"

"Kyle thought it was cruel to make her suffer longer. She was... unhappy."

"I wish I could have said goodbye," I murmured to myself. "And good luck. How is Jodi?"

"No response yet."

"The Healer's body?"

"Trudy took her away. I think they went to get her something to eat. They're working on finding a temporary name she likes, so we can call her something besides the body." He smiled wryly.

"She'll be fine. I'm sure she will," I said, trying to believe the words. "And Jodi, too. It will all work out."

No one called me on my lies. They knew I was saying this for myself.

Doc sighed. "I don't want to be away from Jodi long. She might need something."

"Right," I agreed. "Let's get this over with." The quicker the better. Because it didn't matter what was said here; Doc had agreed to my terms. And yet there was some stupid part of me that hoped... hoped that there was a solution that would make everything perfect and let me stay with Ian and Mel with Jared in a way that absolutely no one would suffer for. Best to crush that impossible hope quickly.

"Okay," Jeb said. "Wanda, what's your side?"

"I'm giving Melanie back." Firm, short-no reasons to argue against.

"Ian, what's yours?"

"We need Wanda here."

Firm, short-he was copying me.

Jeb nodded to himself. "That's a tricky one. Wanda, why should I agree with you?"

"If it were you, you'd want your body back. You can't deny Melanie that."

"Ian?" Jeb asked.

"We have to look at the greater good, Jeb. Wanda's already brought us more health and security than we've ever had. She's vital to the survival of our community-of the entire human race. One person can't stand in the way of that."

He's right.

Nobody asked you.

Jared spoke up. "Wanda, what does Mel say?"

Ha, Mel said.

I stared into Jared's eyes, and the strangest thing happened. All the melting and melding I had just been through was shoved aside, into the smallest part of my body, the little corner that I took up physically. The rest of me yearned toward Jared with the same desperate, half-crazed hunger I'd felt since the first time I'd seen him here. This body barely belonged to me or to Melanie-it belonged to him.

There really wasn't room enough for the two of us in here.

"Melanie wants her body back. She wants her life back."

Liar. Tell them the truth.

No.

"Liar," Ian said. "I can see you arguing with her. I'll bet she agrees with me. She's a good person. She knows how much we need you."

"Mel knows everything I know. She'll be able to help you. And the Healer's host. She knows more than I ever did. You'll be fine. You were fine before I was here. You'll survive, just like before."

Jeb blew out a puff of air, frowning. "I don't know, Wanda. Ian's got a point."

I glared at the old man and saw that Jared was doing the same. I looked away from that station to level a grim glance at Doc.

Doc met my eyes, and his face clenched with pain. He understood the reminder I was giving him. He'd promised. This tribunal didn't overrule that.

Ian was watching Jared-he didn't see our silent exchange.

"Jeb," Jared protested. "There's only one decision here. You know that."

"Is there, kid? Seems to me there's a whole barrel of 'em."

"That's Melanie's body!"

"And Wanda's, too."

Jared choked on his response and had to start over. "You can't leave Mel trapped in there-it's like murder, Jeb."

Ian leaned forward into the light, his face suddenly furious again. "And what is it that you're doing to Wanda, Jared? And the rest of us, if you take her away?"

"You don't care about the rest of anybody! You just want to keep Wanda at Melanie's expense-nothing else matters to you."

"And you want to have Melanie at Wanda's expense-nothing else matters to you! So, with those things being equal, it comes down to what's best for everyone else."

"No! It comes down to what Melanie wants! That's her body!"

They were both crouched halfway between sitting and standing now, their fists clenched and their faces twisted with rage.

"Cool it, boys! Cool it right now," Jeb ordered. "This is a tribunal, and we're going to stay calm and keep our heads. We've got to think about every side."

"Jeb -" Jared began.

"Shut up." Jeb chewed on his lip for a while. "Okay, here's how I see it. Wanda's right -"

Ian lurched to his feet.

"Hold it! Sit yourself back down. Let me finish."

Jeb waited until Ian, the tendons standing out in his taut neck, stiffly returned to a seated position.

"Wanda is right," Jeb said. "Mel needs her body back. But," he added quickly when Ian tensed again, "but I don't agree with the rest, Wanda. I think we need you pretty bad, kid. We got Seekers out there lookin' for us, and you can talk right to 'em. The rest of us can't do that. You save lives. I got to think about the welfare of my household."

Jared spoke through his teeth. "So we get her another body. Obviously."

Doc's crumpled face lifted. Jeb's white caterpillar eyebrows touched his hairline. Ian's eyes widened and his lips pursed. He stared at me, considering....

"No! No!" I shook my head frantically.

"Why not, Wanda?" Jeb asked. "Don't sound like a half-bad idea to me."

I swallowed and took a deep breath so my voice wouldn't turn hysterical. "Jeb. Listen to me carefully, Jeb. I am tired of being a parasite. Can you understand that? Do you think I want to go into another body and have this start all over again? Do I have to feel guilty forever for taking someone's life away from them? Do I have to have someone else hate me? I'm barely a soul anymore-I love you brutish humans too much. It's wrong for me to be here, and I hate feeling that."

I took another breath and spoke through the tears that were falling now. "And what if things change? What if you put me in some-one else, steal another life, and it goes wrong? What if that body pulls me after some other love, back to the souls? What if you can't trust me anymore? What if I betray you next time? I don't want to hurt you!"

The first part was the pure and unadorned truth, but I was lying wildly through the second. I hoped they wouldn't hear that. It would help that the words were barely coherent, my tears turned to sobs. I would never hurt them. What had happened to me here was permanent, a part of the very atoms that made up my small body. But maybe, if I gave them a reason to fear me, they would more easily accept what had to be.

And my lies worked, for once. I caught the worried glance Jared and Jeb exchanged. They hadn't thought of that-of my becoming untrustworthy, becoming a danger. Ian was already moving to put his arms around me. He dried my tears against his chest.

"It's okay, honey. You don't have to be anyone else. Nothing's going to change."

"Hold on, Wanda," Jeb said, his shrewd eyes suddenly sharper. "How does going to one of those other planets help you? You'll still be a parasite, kid."

planets help you. You can be a parasite, kid.

Ian flinched around me at the harsh word.

And I flinched also, because Jeb was too insightful, as always.

They waited for my answer, all but Doc, who knew what the real answer was. The one I wouldn't give.

I tried to say only true things. "It's different on other planets, Jeb. There isn't any resistance. And the hosts themselves are different. They aren't as individualized as humans, their emotions are so much milder. It doesn't feel like stealing a life. Not like it feels here. No one will hate me. And I'd be too far away to hurt you. You'd be safer..."

The last part sounded too much like the lie it was, so I let my voice trail off.

Jeb stared at me through narrowed eyes, and I looked away.

I tried not to look at Doc, but I couldn't help one brief glance, to make sure he understood. His eyes locked on mine, clearly miserable, and I knew that he did.

As I quickly lowered my gaze, I caught Jared staring at Doc. Had he seen the silent communication?

Jeb sighed. "This is... a pickle." His face turned into a grimace as he concentrated on the dilemma.

"Jeb -" Ian and Jared said together. They both stopped and scowled at each other.

This was all just a waste of time, and I had only hours. Just a few more hours, I knew that for certain now.

"Jeb," I said softly, my voice barely audible over the spring's gushing murmur, and everyone turned to me. "You don't have to decide right now. Doc needs to check on Jodi, and I'd like to see her, too. Plus, I haven't eaten all day. Why don't you sleep on it? We can talk again tomorrow. We've got plenty of time to think about this."

Lies. Could they tell?

"That's a good idea, Wanda. I think everyone here could use a breather. Go get some food, and we'll all sleep on it."

I was very careful not to look at Doc now, even when I spoke to him.

"I'll be along to help with Jodi after I eat, Doc. See you later."

"Okay," Doc said warily.

Why couldn't he keep his tone casual? He was a human-he should have been a good liar.

"Hungry?" Ian murmured, and I nodded. I let him help me up. He latched on to my hand, and I knew he would be keeping a tight hold on me now. That didn't worry me. He slept deeply, like Jamie.

As we walked from the dark room, I could feel eyes on my back, but I wasn't sure whose.

Just a few more things to do. Three, to be precise. Three last deeds to be completed.

First, I ate.

It wouldn't be nice to leave Mel with her body uncomfortable from hunger. Besides, the food was better since I'd been raiding. Something to look forward to rather than endure.

I made Ian get the food and bring it to me while I hid in the field where half-grown sprouts of wheat replaced the corn. I told Ian the truth so that he would help me: I was avoiding Jamie. I didn't want Jamie frightened by this decision. It would be harder for him than for Jared or Ian-they each took one side. Jamie loved us both; he would be more evenly torn.

Ian did not argue with me. We ate in silence, his arm tight around my waist.

Second, I went to see Sunny and Jodi.

I expected to see three glowing cryotanks on top of Doc's desk, and I was surprised that there were still just the two Healers, set in the center. Doc and Kyle hovered over the cot where Jodi lay inert. I walked quickly to them, about to demand to know where Sunny was, but when I got closer, I saw that Kyle had an occupied cryotank cradled in one arm.

"You'll want to be gentle with that," I murmured.

Doc was touching Jodi's wrist, counting to himself. His lips pressed into a thin line when he heard my voice, and he had to begin over again.

"Yeah, Doc told me that," Kyle said, his gaze never leaving Jodi's face. A dark, matched set of bruises was forming under his eyes. Was his nose broken again? "I'm being careful. I just... didn't want to leave her alone over there. She was so sad and so... sweet."

"I'm sure she'd appreciate it, if she knew."

He nodded, still staring at Jodi. "Is there something I'm supposed to be doing here? Is there some way to help?"

"Talk to her, say her name, talk about things she'll remember. Talk about Sunny, even. That helped with the Healer's host."

“Mandy,” Doc corrected. “She says it’s not exactly right, but it’s close.”

“Mandy,” I repeated. Not that I would need to remember. “Where is she?”

“With Trudy-that was a good call there. Trudy’s exactly the right person. I think she’s gotten her to sleep.”

“That’s good. Mandy will be okay.”

“I hope so.” Doc smiled, but it didn’t affect his gloomy expression much. “I’ve got lots of questions for her.”

I looked at the small woman-it was still impossible to believe that she was older than the body I wore. Her face was slack and vacant. It frightened me a little-she’d been so vibrantly alive when Sunny was inside. Would Mel... ?

I’m still here.

I know. You’ll be fine.

Like Lacey. She winced, and so did I.

Never like Lacey.

I touched Jodi’s arm softly. She was much like Lacey in some ways. Olive skinned and black haired and tiny. They could almost be sisters, except that Jodi’s sweet, wan face could never look so repellent.

Kyle was tongue-tied, holding her hand.

“Like this, Kyle,” I said. I brushed her arm again. “Jodi? Jodi, can you hear me? Kyle’s waiting for you, Jodi. He got himself in a lot of trouble getting you here-everybody who knows him wants to beat him senseless.” I grinned wryly at the big man, and his lips curled up at the corners, though he didn’t look up to see my smile.

“Not that you’re surprised to hear that,” Ian said beside me. “When hasn’t that been the case, eh, Jodi? It’s good to see you again, sweetheart. Though I wonder if you feel the same way. Must have been a nice break to get rid of this idiot for so long.”

Kyle hadn’t noticed his brother was there, attached like a vise to my hand, until Ian spoke.

“You remember Ian, of course. Never has managed to catch up to me in anything, but he keeps trying. Hey, Ian,” Kyle added, never moving his eyes, “you got anything you want to say to me?”

“Not really.”

“I’m waiting for an apology.”

“Keep waiting.”

“Can you believe he kicked me in the face, Jodes? For no reason at all.”

“Who needs an excuse, eh, Jodi?”

It was oddly pleasant, the banter between the brothers. Jodi’s presence kept it light and teasing. Gentle and funny. I would have woken up for this. If I were her, I would have been smiling already.

“Keep it up, Kyle,” I murmured. “That’s just right. She’ll come around.”

I wished I would get to meet her, to see what she was like. I could only picture Sunny’s expressions.

What would it be like for everyone here, meeting Melanie for the first time? Would it seem the same to them, as if there were no difference? Would they really grasp that I was gone, or would Melanie simply fill the role I had?

Maybe they would find her entirely different. Maybe they would have to adjust to her all over again. Maybe she would fit in the way I never had. I pictured her, which was picturing me, the center of a crowd of friendly faces. Pictured us with Freedom in our arms and all the humans who had never trusted me smiling with welcome.

Why did that bring tears to my eyes? Was I really so petty?

No, Mel assured me. And they’ll miss you-of course they will. All the best people here will feel your loss.

She seemed to finally accept my decision.

Not accept, she disagreed. I just can’t see any way to stop you. And I can feel how close it is. I’m scared, too. Isn’t that funny? I’m absolutely terrified.

That makes two of us.

“Wanda?” Kyle said.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Um... why?”

“For trying to kill you,” he said casually. “Guess I was wrong.”

Ian gasped. “Please tell me you have some kind of recording device available, Doc.”

“Nope. Sorry, Ian.”

Ian shook his head. “This moment should be preserved. I never thought I’d live to see the day that Kyle O’Shea would admit to being wrong. C’mon, Jodi. That ought to shock you awake.”

“Jodi, baby, don’t you want to defend me? Tell Ian I never have been wrong before.” He chuckled.

That was nice. It was nice to know that I’d earned Kyle’s acceptance before I left. I hadn’t expected that much.

There was no more I could do here. There was no point in lingering. Jodi would either come back or she would not, but neither outcome would change my path now.

So I proceeded to my third and final deed: I lied.

I stepped away from the cot, took a deep breath, and stretched my arms.

“I’m tired, Ian,” I said.

Was it really a lie? It didn’t sound so false. It had been a long, long day, this, my last day. I’d been up all night, I realized. I hadn’t slept since that last raid; I must have been exhausted.

Ian nodded. “I’ll bet you are. Did you stay up with the Heal-with Mandy all night?”

“Yeah.” I yawned.

“Have a nice night, Doc,” Ian said, pulling me toward the exit. “Good luck, Kyle. We’ll be back in the morning.”

“Night, Kyle,” I murmured. “See you, Doc.”

Doc glowered at me, but Ian’s back was to him, and Kyle was staring at Jodi. I returned Doc’s glare with a steady gaze.

Ian walked with me through the black tunnel, saying nothing. I was glad he wasn’t in the mood for conversation. I wouldn’t have been able to concentrate on it. My stomach was twisting and turning, wringing itself into strange contortions.

I was done, all my tasks accomplished. I only had to wait a bit now and not fall asleep. Tired as I was, I didn’t think that would be a problem. My heart was pounding like a fist hitting my ribs from the inside.

No more stalling. It had to be tonight, and Mel knew that, too. What had happened today with Ian had shown me that. The longer I stayed, the more tears and arguments and fights I would cause. The better the chance that I or someone else would slip up and Jamie would find out the truth. Let Mel explain it after the fact. It would be better that way.

Thanks so much, Mel thought; her words flowed fast, in a burst, her fear marring her sarcasm.

Sorry. You don’t mind too much?

She sighed. How can I mind? I’d do anything you asked me to, Wanda.

Take care of them for me.

I would have done that anyway.

Ian, too.

If he’ll let me. I’ve got a feeling he might not like me so much.

Even if he won’t let you.

I’ll do whatever I can for him, Wanda. I promise.

Ian paused in the hall outside the red and gray doors to his room. He raised his eyebrows, and I nodded. Let him think I was still hiding from Jamie. That was true, too.

Ian slid the red door aside, and I went straight to the mattress on the right. I balled up there, knotting my shaking hands in front of my hammering heart, trying to hide them behind my knees.

Ian curled around me, holding me close to his chest. This would have been fine-I knew that he would end up sprawled out in all directions when he was really asleep-except that he could feel my trembling.

“It’s going to be fine, Wanda. I know we’ll find a solution.”

“I truly love you, Ian.” It was the only way I could tell him goodbye. The only way he would accept. I knew he would remember later and understand. “With my whole soul, I love you.”

“I truly love you, too, my Wanderer.”

He nuzzled his face against mine until he found my lips, then he kissed me, slow and gentle, the flow of molten rock swelling languidly in the dark at the center of the earth, until my shaking slowed.

“Sleep, Wanda. Save it for tomorrow. It will keep for the night.”

I nodded, moving my face against his, and sighed.

Ian was tired, too. I didn’t have to wait long. I stared at the ceiling-the stars had moved above the cracks here. I could see three of them now, where before there had been only two. I watched them wink and pulse

across the blackness of space. They did not call to me. I had no desire to join them.

One at a time, Ian's arms fell away from me. He flopped onto his back, muttering in his sleep. I didn't dare wait any longer; I wanted too badly to stay, to fall asleep with him and steal one more day.

I moved cautiously, but he was in no danger of waking. His breathing was heavy and even. He wouldn't open his eyes till morning.

I brushed his smooth forehead with my lips, then rose and slid out the door.

It was not late, and the caves were not empty. I could hear voices bouncing around, strange echoes that might have been coming from anywhere. I didn't see anyone until I was in the big cave. Geoffrey, Heath, and Lily were on their way back from the kitchen. I kept my eyes down, though I was very glad to see Lily. In the brief glimpse I allowed myself, I could see that she was at least standing upright, her shoulders straight. Lily was tough. Like Mel. She'd make it, too.

I hurried to the southern corridor, relieved when I was safe in the blackness there. Relieved and horrified. It was really over now.

I'm so afraid, I whimpered.

Before Mel could respond, a heavy hand dropped on my shoulder from the darkness.

"Going somewhere?"

The Host

CHAPTER 58

Finished

I was so tightly wound that I shrieked in terror; I was so terrified that my shriek was only a breathless little squeal.

"Sorry!" Jared's arm went around my shoulders, comforting. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, still breathless.

"Following you. I've been following you all night."

"Well, stop it now."

There was a hesitation in the dark, and his arm didn't move. I shrugged out from under it, but he caught my wrist. His grip was firm; I wouldn't be able to shake free easily.

"You're going to see Doc?" he asked, and there was no confusion in the question. It was obvious that he wasn't talking about a social visit.

"Of course I am." I hissed the words so that he wouldn't hear the panic in my voice. "What else can I do after today? It's not going to get any better. And this isn't Jeb's decision to make."

"I know. I'm on your side."

It made me angry that these words still had the power to hurt me, to bring tears stinging into my eyes. I tried to hold on to the thought of Ian—he was the anchor, as Kyle somehow had been for Sunny—but it was hard with Jared's hand touching me, with the smell of him in my nose. Like trying to make out the song of one violin when the entire percussion section was bashing away...

"Then let me go, Jared. Go away. I want to be alone." The words came out fierce and fast and hard. It was easy to hear that they weren't lies.

"I should come with you."

"You'll have Melanie back soon enough," I snapped. "I'm only asking for a few minutes, Jared. Give me that much."

Another pause; his hand didn't loosen.

"Wanda, I would come to be with you."

The tears spilled over. I was grateful for the darkness.

"It wouldn't feel that way," I whispered. "So there's no point."

Of course Jared could not be allowed to be there. Only Doc could be trusted. Only he had promised me. And I wasn't leaving this planet. I wasn't going to go live as a Dolphin or a Flower, always grieving for the loves I'd left behind me, all dead by the time I opened my eyes again—if I even had eyes. This was my planet, and they wouldn't make me leave. I would stay in the dirt, in the dark grotto with my friends. A human grave for the human I had become.

"But Wanda, I... There's so much that I need to say to you..."

But Wanda, I... There's so much that I need to say to you.

"I don't want your gratitude, Jared. Trust me on that."

"What do you want?" he whispered, his voice strained and choked. "I would give you anything."

"Take care of my family. Don't let the others kill them."

"Of course I'll take care of them." He dismissed my request brusquely. "I meant you. What can I give you?"

"I can't take anything with me, Jared."

"Not even a memory, Wanda? What do you want?"

I brushed the tears away with my free hand, but others took their place too quickly for it to matter. No, I couldn't take even a memory.

"What can I give you, Wanda?" he insisted.

I took a deep breath and tried to keep my voice steady.

"Give me a lie, Jared. Tell me you want me to stay."

There was no hesitation this time. His arms wound around me in the dark, held me securely against his chest. He pressed his lips against my forehead, and I felt his breath move my hair when he spoke.

Melanie was holding her breath in my head. She was trying to bury herself again, trying to give me my freedom for these last minutes. Maybe she was afraid to listen to these lies. She wouldn't want this memory when I was gone.

"Stay here, Wanda. With us. With me. I don't want you to go. Please. I can't imagine having you gone. I can't see that. I don't know how to... how to..." His voice broke.

He was a very good liar. And he must have been very, very sure of me to say those things.

I rested against him for a moment, but I could feel the time pulling me away. Time was up. Time was up.

"Thank you," I whispered, and I tried to extricate myself.

His arms tightened. "I'm not done."

Our faces were only inches apart. He closed the distance, and even here, on the edge of my last breath on this planet, I couldn't help responding. Gasoline and an open flame—we exploded again.

It wasn't the same, though. I could feel that. This was for me. It was my name that he gasped when he held this body—and he thought of it as my body, thought of it as me. I could feel the difference. For one moment, it was just us, just Wanderer and Jared, both of us burning.

No one had ever lied better than Jared lied with his body in my last minutes, and for that I was grateful. I couldn't take it with me, because I wasn't going anywhere, but it eased some of the pain of leaving. I could believe the lie. I could believe that he would miss me so much that it might even mar some of his joy. I shouldn't want that, but it felt good to believe it anyway.

I couldn't ignore the time, the seconds ticking like a countdown. Even on fire, I could feel them dragging at me, sucking me down the dark corridor. Taking me away from all this heat and feeling.

I managed to pull my lips away from his. We panted in the dark, our breath warm on each other's faces.

"Thank you," I said again.

"Wait..."

"I can't. I can't... bear any more. Okay?"

"Okay," he whispered.

"I just want one more thing. Let me do this alone. Please?"

"If... if you're sure that's what you want..." He trailed off, unsure.

"It's what I need, Jared."

"Then I'll stay here," he said hoarsely.

"I'll send Doc to get you when it's over."

His arms were still locked around me.

"You know that Ian is going to try to kill me for letting you do this? Maybe I should let him. And Jamie. He'll never forgive either of us."

"I can't think about them right now. Please. Let me go."

Slowly, with a palpable reluctance that warmed some of the cold emptiness in the center of my body, Jared let his arms slide away.

"I love you, Wanda."

I sighed. "Thanks, Jared. You know how much I love you. With my whole heart."

Heart and soul. Not the same thing, in my case. I'd been divided too long. It was time to make something whole again. Make a whole person. Even if that excluded me.

whose again, make a whole person. Even if that shocked me.

The ticking seconds pulled me toward the end. It was cold when he no longer held me. It got colder every step I took away from him.

Just my imagination, of course. It was still summer here. It would always be summer here for me.

“What happens here when it rains, Jared?” I whispered. “Where do people sleep?”

It took him a moment to answer, and I could hear tears in his voice. “We...” He swallowed. “We all move into the game room. Everyone sleeps in there together.”

I nodded to myself. I wondered what the atmosphere would be like. Awkward, with all the conflicting personalities? Or was it fun? A change? Like a slumber party?

“Why?” he whispered.

“I just wanted to... imagine. How it will be.” Life and love would go on. Even though it would happen without me, the idea brought me joy. “Goodbye, Jared. Mel says she’ll see you soon.”

Liar.

“Wait... Wanda...”

I hurried down the tunnel, hurried away from any chance that he might, with his grateful lies, convince me not to go. There was only silence behind me.

His pain did not hurt me the way Ian’s had. For Jared, pain would be over soon. Joy was only minutes away. The happy ending.

The southern tunnel felt only a few yards long. I could see the bright lantern burning ahead, and I knew Doc was waiting for me.

I walked into the room that had always frightened me with my shoulders squared. Doc had everything prepared. In the dimmest corner, I could see two cots pushed together, Kyle snoring with his arm around Jodi’s motionless form. His other arm was still curled around Sunny’s tank. She would have liked that. I wished there was some way to tell her.

“Hey, Doc,” I whispered.

He looked up from the table where he was setting out the medicine. There were already tears streaming down his face.

And suddenly, I was brave. My heart slowed to an even pace. My breath deepened and relaxed. The hardest parts were over.

I had done this before. Many times. I had closed my eyes and gone away. Always knowing new eyes would open again, but still. This was familiar. Nothing to fear.

I went to the cot and hopped up so that I was sitting on it. I reached for the No Pain with steady hands and screwed the lid off. I put the little tissue square on my tongue, let it dissolve.

There was no change. I wasn’t in any pain this time. No physical pain.

“Tell me something, Doc. What’s your real name?”

I wanted to answer all the little puzzles before the end.

Doc sniffed and wiped the back of his hand under his eyes.

“Eustace. It’s a family name, and my parents were cruel people.”

I laughed once. Then I sighed. “Jared’s waiting, back by the big cave. I promised him you’d tell him when it was over. Just wait until I-until I... stop moving, okay? It will be too late for him to do anything about my decision then.”

“I don’t want to do this, Wanda.”

“I know. Thanks for that, Doc. But I’m holding you to your promise.”

“Please?”

“No. You gave me your word. I did my part, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“Then do yours. Let me stay with Walt and Wes.”

His thin face worked as he tried to keep back a sob.

“Will you be... in pain?”

“No, Doc,” I lied. “I won’t feel anything.”

I waited for the euphoria to come, for the No Pain to set everything glowing the way it had the last time. I still didn’t feel any difference.

It must not have been the No Pain after all-it had just been being loved. I sighed again.

I stretched out on the cot, on my stomach, and turned my face toward him.

“Put me under, Doc.”

The bottle opened. I heard him shake it onto the cloth in his hand.

“You are the noblest, purest creature I’ve ever met. The universe will be a darker place without you,” he whispered.

These were his words over my grave, my epitaph, and I was glad that I got to hear them.

Thank you, Wanda. My sister. I will never forget you.

Be happy, Mel. Enjoy it all. Appreciate it for me.

I will, she promised.

Bye, we thought together.

Doc’s hand pressed the cloth gently over my face. I breathed in deeply, ignoring the thick, uncomfortable scent. As I took another breath, I saw the three stars again. They were not calling to me; they were letting me go, leaving me to the black universe I had wandered for so many lifetimes. I drifted into the black, and it got brighter and brighter. It wasn’t black at all-it was blue. Warm, vibrant, brilliant blue... I floated into it with no fear at all.

The Host

CHAPTER 59

Remembered

The beginning would feel like the end. I’d been warned.

But this time the end was a greater surprise than it had ever been. Greater than any end I’d remembered in nine lives. Greater than jumping down an elevator shaft. I had expected no more memories, no more thoughts. What end was this?

The sun is setting-the colors are all rosy, and they make me think of my friend... what would her name be here? Something about... ruffles? Ruffles and more ruffles. She was a beautiful Flower. The flowers here are so lifeless and boring. They smell wonderful, though. Smells are the best part of this place.

Footsteps behind me. Has Cloud Spinner followed me again? I don’t need a jacket. It’s warm here-finally!-and I want to feel the air on my skin. I won’t look at her. Maybe she’ll think I can’t hear and she’ll go home. She is so careful with me, but I’m almost grown now. She can’t mother me forever.

“Excuse me?” someone says, and I don’t know the voice.

I turn to look at her, and I don’t know the face, either. She’s pretty.

The face in the memory jerked me back to myself. That was my face! But I didn’t remember this....

“Hi,” I say.

“Hello. My name is Melanie.” She smiles at me. “I’m new in town and... I think I’m lost.”

“Oh! Where are you trying to go? I’ll take you. Our car is just back -“

“No, it’s not far. I was going for a walk, but now I can’t find my way back to Becker Street.”

She’s a new neighbor-how nice. I love new friends.

“You’re very close,” I tell her. “It’s just around the second corner up that way, but you can cut right through this little alley here. It takes you straight there.”

“Could you show me? I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“Of course! Come with me. I’m Petals Open to the Moon, but my family mostly calls me Pet. Where are you from, Melanie?”

She laughs. “Do you mean San Diego or the Singing World, Pet?”

“Either one.” I laugh, too. I like her smile. “There are two Bats on this street. They live in that yellow house with the pine trees.”

“I’ll have to say hello,” she murmurs, but her voice has changed, tensed. She’s looking into the dusky alley as though she’s expecting to see something.

And there is something there. Two people, a man and a boy. The boy drags his hand through his long black hair like he’s nervous. Maybe he is worried because he’s lost, too. His pretty eyes are wide and excited. The man is very still.

Jamie. Jared. My heart thumped, but the feeling was peculiar, wrong. Too small and... fluttery.

“These are my friends, Pet,” Melanie tells me.

“Oh! Oh, hello.” I stretch my hand out to the man-he’s the closest.

He reaches for my hand, and his grip is so strong.

He yanks me forward, right up to his body. I don't understand. This feels wrong. I don't like it. My heart beats faster, and I'm afraid. I've never been scared like this before. I don't understand. His hand swings toward my face, and I gasp. I suck in the mist that comes from his hand. A silver cloud that tastes like raspberries.

"Wha -" I want to ask, but I can't see them anymore. I can't see anything....

There was no more.

"Wanda? Can you hear me, Wanda?" a familiar voice asked.

That wasn't the right name... was it? My ears didn't react to it, but something did. Wasn't I Petals Open to the Moon? Pet? Was that it? That didn't feel right, either. My heart beat faster, an echo of the fear in my memory. A vision of a woman with white-and-red-streaked hair and kind green eyes filled my head. Where was my mother? But... she wasn't my mother, was she?

A sound, a low voice that echoed around me. "Wanda. Come back. We aren't letting you go."

The voice was familiar, and it was also not. It sounded like... me?

Where was Petals Open to the Moon? I couldn't find her. Just a thousand empty memories. A house full of pictures but no inhabitants.

"Use the Awake," a voice said. I didn't recognize this one.

Something brushed my face, light as the touch of fog. I knew that scent. It was the smell of grapefruit.

I took a deeper breath, and my mind suddenly cleared.

I could feel that I was lying down... but this felt wrong, too. There wasn't... enough of me. I felt shrunken.

My hands were warmer than the rest of me, and that was because they were being held. Held in big hands, hands that swallowed them right up.

It smelled odd-stuffy and a little moldy. I remembered the smell... but surely I'd never smelled it before in my life.

I saw nothing but dull red-the insides of my eyelids. I wanted to open them, so I went searching for the right muscles to do that.

"Wanderer? We're all waiting for you, honey. Open your eyes."

This voice, this warm breath against my ear, was even more familiar. A strange feeling tickled through my veins at the sound. A feeling I'd never, ever felt before. The sound made my breath catch and my fingers tremble.

I wanted to see the face that went with that voice.

A color washed through my mind-a color that called to me from a faraway life-a brilliant, glowing blue. The whole universe was bright blue....

And finally I knew my name. Yes, that was right. Wanderer. I was Wanderer. Wanda, too. I remembered that now.

A light touch on my face-a warm pressure on my lips, on my eyelids. Ah, that's where they were. I could make them blink now that I'd found them.

"She's waking up!" someone crowed excitedly.

Jamie. Jamie was here. My heart gave another fluttery little thump.

It took a moment for my eyes to focus. The blue that stabbed my eyes was all wrong-too pale, too washed out. It wasn't the blue I wanted.

A hand touched my face. "Wanderer?"

I looked to the sound. The movement of my head on my neck felt so odd. It didn't feel like it used to, but at the same time it felt the way it had always felt.

My searching eyes found the blue I'd been looking for. Sapphire, snow, and midnight.

"Ian? Ian, where am I?" The sound of the voice coming out of my throat frightened me. So high and trilling. Familiar, but not mine. "Who am I?"

"You're you," Ian told me. "And you're right where you belong."

I pulled one of my hands free from the giant's hand that held it. I meant to touch my face, but someone's hand reached toward me, and I froze.

The reaching hand also froze above me.

I tried to move my hand again, to protect myself, but that moved the hand above me. I started shaking, and the hand trembled.

Oh.

I opened and closed the hand, looking at it carefully.

Was this my hand, this tiny thing? It was a child's hand, except for the long pink-and-white nails, tiled into perfect, smooth curves. The skin was fair, with a strange silvery cast to it and, entirely incongruous, a scattering of golden freckles.

It was the odd combination of silver and gold that brought the image back: I could see a face in my head, reflected in a mirror.

The setting of the memory threw me off for a moment because I wasn't used to so much civilization-at the same time, I knew nothing but civilization. A pretty dresser with all kinds of frilly and delicate things on top of it. A profusion of dainty glass bottles containing the scents I loved-I loved? Or she loved?-so much. A potted orchid. A set of silver combs.

The big round mirror was framed in a wreath of metal roses. The face in the mirror was roundish, too, not quite oval. Small. The skin on the face had the same silver undertone-silver like moonlight-as the hand did, with another handful of the golden freckles across the bridge of the nose. Wide gray eyes, the silver of the soul shimmering faintly behind the soft color, framed by tangled golden lashes. Pale pink lips, full and almost round, like a baby's. Small, even white teeth behind them. A dimple in the chin. And everywhere, everywhere, golden, waving hair that stood away from my face in a bright halo and fell below where the mirror showed.

My face or her face?

It was the perfect face for a Night Flower. Like an exact translation from Flower to human.

"Where is she?" my high, reedy voice demanded. "Where is Pet?" Her absence frightened me. I'd never seen a more defenseless creature than this half-child with her moonlight face and sunlight hair.

"She's right here," Doc assured me. "Tanked and ready to go. We thought you could tell us the best place to send her."

I looked toward his voice. When I saw him standing in the sunlight, a lit cryotank in his hands, a rush of memories from my former life came back to me.

"Doc!" I gasped in the tiny, fragile voice. "Doc, you promised! You gave me your oath, Eustace! Why? Why did you break your word?"

A dim recollection of misery and pain touched me. This body had never felt such agony before. It shied away from the sting.

"Even an honest man sometimes caves to duress, Wanda."

"Duress," another terribly familiar voice scoffed.

"I'd say a knife to the throat counts as duress, Jared."

"You knew I wouldn't really use it."

"That I did not. You were quite persuasive."

"A knife?" My body trembled.

"Shh, it's all okay," Ian murmured. His breath blew strands of golden hair across my face, and I brushed them away-a routine gesture. "Did you really think you could leave us that way? Wanda!" He sighed, but the sigh was joyful.

Ian was happy. This insight made my worry suddenly much lighter, easier to bear.

"I told you I didn't want to be a parasite," I whispered.

"Let me through," my old voice ordered. And then I could see my face, the strong one, with the sun-brown skin, the straight black line of the eyebrows over the almond-shaped, hazel eyes, the high, sharp cheekbones... See it backward, not as a reflection, the way I'd always seen it before.

"Listen up, Wanda. I know exactly what you don't want to be. But we're human, and we're selfish, and we don't always do the right thing. We aren't going to let you go. Deal with it."

The way she spoke, the cadence and the tone, not the voice, brought back all the silent conversations, the voice in my head, my sister.

"Mel? Mel, you're okay!"

She smiled then and leaned over to hug my shoulders. She was bigger than I remembered being.

"Of course I am. Wasn't that the point of all the drama? And you're going to be fine, too. We weren't stupid about it. We didn't just grab the first body we saw."

"Let me tell her, let me!" Jamie shoved in beside Mel. It was getting very crowded around the cot. It rocked, unstable.

I took his hand and squeezed it. My hands felt so feeble. Could he even feel the pressure?

"Jamie!"

"Hey, Wanda! This is cool, isn't it? You're smaller than me now!" He grinned, triumphant.

"But still older. I'm almost..." And then I stopped, changing my sentence abruptly. "My birthday is in two..."

“We were able to keep her hydrated, but we had no way to feed her. We were worried about atrophy-her muscles, her brain...”

While my new heart ached harder than it had ever ached-ached for a woman I’d never known-my eyes continued around the circle and then froze.

Jodi, clinging to Kyle’s side, stared back at me.

She smiled tentatively, and suddenly I recognized her.

“Sunny!”

“I got to stay,” she said, not quite smug but almost. “Just like you.” She glanced at Kyle’s face-which was more stoic than I was used to seeing it-and her voice turned sad. “I’m trying, though. I am looking for her. I will keep looking.”

“Kyle had us put Sunny back when it looked like we would lose Jodi,” Doc continued quietly.

I stared at Sunny and Kyle for a moment, stunned, and then finished the circle.

Ian was watching me with a strange combination of joy and nervousness. His face was higher than it should have been, bigger than it used to be. But his eyes were still the blue I remembered. The anchor that held me to this planet.

“You okay in there?” he asked.

“I... I don’t know,” I admitted. “This feels very... weird. Every bit as weird as switching species. So much weirder than I would have thought. I... I don’t know.”

My heart fluttered again, looking into those eyes, and this was no memory of another lifetime’s love. My mouth felt dry, and my stomach quivered. The place where his arm touched my back felt more alive than the rest of my body.

“You don’t mind staying here too much, do you, Wanda? Do you think that maybe you could tolerate it?” he murmured.

Jamie squeezed my hand. Melanie put hers on top of his, then smiled when Jared added his to the pile. Trudy patted my foot. Geoffrey, Heath, Heidi, Andy, Paige, Brandt, and even Lily were beaming at me. Kyle had shuffled closer, a grin spreading across his face. Sunny’s smile was the smile of a coconspirator.

How much No Pain had Doc given me? Everything was glowing.

Ian brushed the cloud of golden hair back from my face and laid his hand on my cheek. His hand was so big just the palm covered from my jaw to my forehead; the contact sent a jolt of electricity through my silvery skin. It tingled after that first jolt, and the pit of my stomach tingled along with it.

I could feel a warm flush pinkening my cheeks. My heart had never been broken before, but it had also never flown. It made me shy; I had a hard time finding my voice.

“I suppose I could do that,” I whispered. “If it makes you happy.”

“That’s not good enough, actually,” Ian disagreed. “It has to make you happy, too.”

I could only meet his gaze for a few seconds at a time; the shyness, so new and confusing to me, had my eyes dropping to my lap again and again.

“I... think it might,” I agreed. “I think it might make me very, very happy.”

Happy and sad, elated and miserable, secure and afraid, loved and denied, patient and angry, peaceful and wild, complete and empty... all of it. I would feel everything. It would all be mine.

Ian coaxed my face up until I looked him in the eyes, my cheeks flushing darker.

“Then you will stay.”

He kissed me, right in front of everyone, but I forgot the audience quickly. This was easy and right, no division, no confusion, no objection, just Ian and me, the molten rock moving through this new body, melding it into the pact.

“I will stay,” I agreed.

And my tenth life began.

EPILOGUE

Continued

Life and love went on in the last human outpost on the planet Earth, but things did not stay exactly the same.

I was not the same.

This was my first rebirth into a body of the same species. I found the transfer much more difficult than changing planets because I had so many expectations about being human already in place. Also, I’d inherited a lot of things from Petals Open to the Moon, and not all of them were pleasant.

I'd inherited a great deal of grief for Cloud Spinner. I missed the mother I'd never known and mourned for her suffering now. Perhaps there could be no joy on this planet without an equal weight of pain to balance it out on some unknown scale.

I'd inherited unexpected limitations. I was used to a body that was strong and fast and tall-a body that could run for miles, go without food and water, lift heavy weights, and reach high shelves. This body was weak-and not just physically. This body seized up with crippling shyness every time I was unsure of myself, which seemed to be often these days.

I'd inherited a different role in the human community. People carried things for me now and let me pass first into a room. They gave me the easiest chores and then, half the time, took the work right out of my hands anyway. Worse than that, I needed the help. My muscles were soft and not used to labor. I tired easily, and my attempts to hide that fooled no one. I probably couldn't have run a mile without stopping.

There was more to this easy treatment than just my physical weakness, though. I was used to a pretty face, but one that people were able to look at with fear, mistrust, even hatred. My new face defied such emotions.

People touched my cheeks often, or put their fingers under my chin, holding my face up to see it better. I was frequently patted on my head (which was in easy reach, since I was shorter than everyone but the children), and my hair was stroked so regularly that I stopped noticing when it happened. Those who had never accepted me before did this as often as my friends. Even Lucina put up only a token resistance when her children began following me like two adoring puppies. Freedom, in particular, crawled onto my lap at every opportunity, burrowing his face in my hair. Isaiah was too big for such displays of affection, but he liked to hold my hand-just the same size as his-while chattering excitedly with me about Spiders and Dragons, soccer and raids. The children still wouldn't go anywhere near Melanie; their mother had frightened them too thoroughly before for her reassurances to change things now.

Even Maggie and Sharon, though they still tried not to look at me, could not maintain their former rigidity in my presence.

My body was not the only change. The monsoons came late to the desert, and I was glad.

For one thing, I'd never smelled the rain on the creosotes before-I could only vaguely remember it from my memories of Melanie's memories, a very dim trail of recall indeed-and now the scent washed out the musty caves, left them smelling fresh and almost spicy. The scent clung to my hair and followed me everywhere. I smelled it in my dreams.

Also, Petals Open to the Moon had lived in Seattle all her life, and the unbroken streak of blue skies and blistering heat was as bewildering-almost numbing-to my system as the dark press of heavy overcast skies would have been to any of these desert dwellers. The clouds were exciting, a change from the bland, featureless pale blue. They had depth and movement. They made pictures in the sky.

There was a great deal of reshuffling to be done in Jeb's caves, and the move to the big game room-now the communal sleeping quarters-was good preparation for more permanent arrangements to follow.

Every space was needed, so rooms could not remain vacant. Still, only the newcomers, Candy-who had remembered her correct name at last-and Lacey, could bear to take Wes's old space. I pitied Candy for her future roommate, but the Healer never betrayed any discontent at the prospect.

When the rains ended, Jamie would move into a free corner in Brandt and Aaron's cave. Melanie and Jared had kicked Jamie out of their room and into Ian's before I'd been reborn in Pet's body; Jamie wasn't so young that they'd needed to give him any excuse.

Kyle was working on widening the small crevice that had been Walter's sleeping space so that it would be ready when the desert was dry again. It really wasn't big enough for more than one, and Kyle would not be staying there alone.

At night in the game room, Sunny slept curled into a ball against Kyle's chest, like a kitten who was friends with a big dog-a rottweiler whom she trusted implicitly. Sunny was always with Kyle. I couldn't remember ever seeing them unattached since I'd opened these silver gray eyes for the first time.

Kyle seemed constantly bemused, too distracted by this impossible relationship he couldn't quite wrap his head around to pay attention to much else. He wasn't giving up on Jodi, but as Sunny clung to him, he held her to his side with gentle hands.

Before the rain, every space was taken, so I stayed with Doc in the hospital that no longer frightened me. The cots were not comfortable, but it was a very interesting place to be. Candy remembered the details of Summer Song's life better than her own; the hospital was a place of miracles now.

After the rain, Doc would not be sleeping in the hospital anymore. The first night in the game room,

Sharon had dragged her mattress right next to Doc's without a word of explanation. Perhaps it was Doc's fascination with the Healer that motivated Sharon, though I doubted Doc had even noticed how pretty the older woman was; his fascination was with her phenomenal knowledge. Or maybe it was just that Sharon was ready to forgive and forget. I hoped that was the case. It would be nice to think that even Sharon and Maggie might be softened over time.

I would not stay in the hospital anymore, either.

The crucial conversation with Ian might never have taken place if not for Jamie. My mouth would go all dry and my palms would sweat whenever I so much as thought of bringing it up. What if those feelings in the hospital, those few perfect moments of certainty right after I'd awoken in this body, had been illusion? What if I remembered them wrong? I knew that nothing had changed for me, but how could I be certain Ian felt the same? The body he'd fallen in love with was still right here!

I expected him to be unsettled—we all were. If it was difficult for me, a soul used to such changes, how hard must it be for the humans?

I was working to put the last of the jealousy and the perplexing echoes of the love I still felt for Jared behind me. I didn't need or want them. Ian was the right partner for me. But sometimes I would catch myself staring at Jared and feel confused. I'd seen Melanie touch Ian's arm or hand and then jerk away as if she'd suddenly remembered who she was. Even Jared, who had the least reason for uncertainty, would occasionally meet my confused gaze with a searching one of his own. And Ian... Of course it must have been hardest for him. I understood that.

We were together nearly as much as Kyle and Sunny. Ian constantly touched my face and hair, was always holding my hands. But who did not respond to this body that way? And wasn't it platonic for everyone else? Why didn't he kiss me again, the way he had that first day?

Maybe he could never love me inside this body, as appealing as it seemed to be to all the other humans here.

That worry was heavy in my heart the night Ian had carried my cot—because it was too heavy for me—to the big, dark game room.

It was raining for the first time in more than six months. There were both laughter and complaints as people shook out their damp bedding and arranged their places. I saw Sharon with Doc and smiled.

“Over here, Wanda,” Jamie called, waving me toward where he'd just set his mattress next to Ian's. “There's room for all three of us now.”

Jamie was the one person who treated me almost exactly the same as before. He did make allowances for my puny physique, but he never seemed surprised to see me enter a room or shocked when Wanderer's words came through these lips.

“You don't really want that cot, do you, Wanda? I'll bet we could all fit okay on the mattresses if we shoved them together.” Jamie grinned at me while he kicked one mattress into the other without waiting for agreement. “You don't take up much space.”

He took the cot from Ian and set it on its side, out of the way. Then Jamie stretched out on the very edge of the far mattress and turned his back to us.

“Oh, hey, Ian,” he added without turning. “I talked to Brandt and Aaron, and I think I'm going to move in with them. Well, I'm beat. Night, guys.”

I stared at Jamie's unmoving form for a long moment. Ian was just as motionless. He couldn't have been having a panic attack, too, though. Was he thinking of some way to extricate himself from the situation?

“Lights out,” Jeb bellowed from across the room. “Everybody shut yer trap so I can get some shut-eye.”

People laughed, but took him seriously as always. One by one, the four lamps were dimmed until the room was black.

Ian's hand found mine; it was warm. Did he notice how cold and sweaty my skin was?

He sank to his knees on the mattress, tugging me gently along. I followed and lay down on the seam between the beds. He kept my hand.

“Is this okay?” Ian whispered. There were other hushed conversations going on around us, made indistinct by the rush of the sulfur spring.

“Yes, thank you,” I answered.

Jamie rolled over, shaking the mattress and knocking into me. “Oops, sorry, Wanda,” he murmured, and then I heard him yawn.

Automatically, I shifted out of his way. Ian was closer than I'd thought. I gasped quietly when I ran into

nim, men tried to give him some room. His arm was suddenly around me, noising me to his body.

It was the strangest feeling; having Ian's arm around me in this very nonplatonically reminded me oddly of my first experience with No Pain. Like I'd been in agony without realizing it, and his touch had taken all the hurt away.

That feeling erased my shyness. I rolled so that I was facing him, and he tightened his arm around me.

"Is this okay?" I whispered, repeating his question.

He kissed my forehead. "Better than okay."

We were silent for a few minutes. Most of the other conversations had died out.

He bent down so that his lips were at my ear and whispered, quieter than before, "Wanda, do you think...?" He fell silent.

"Yes?"

"Well, it looks like I have a room all to myself now. That's not right."

"No. There's not enough space for you to be alone."

"I don't want to be alone. But..."

Why wouldn't he ask? "But what?"

"Have you had enough time to sort things out yet? I don't want to rush you. I know it's confusing... with Jared..."

It took me a moment to process what he was saying, but then I giggled quietly. Melanie wasn't much given to giggling, but Pet had been, and her body betrayed me at this most inopportune moment.

"What?" he demanded.

"I was giving you time to sort things out," I explained in a whisper. "I didn't want to rush you-because I know it's confusing. With Melanie."

He jumped just a little in surprise. "You thought...? But Melanie isn't you. I was never confused."

I was smiling in the dark now. "And Jared isn't you."

His voice was tighter when he answered. "But he's still Jared. And you love him."

Ian was jealous again? I shouldn't have been pleased by negative emotions, but I had to admit this was encouraging.

"Jared is my past, another life. You are my present."

He was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was rough with emotion. "And your future, if you want that."

"Yes, please."

And then he kissed me in the most unplatonic way possible under the crowded circumstances, and I was thrilled to remember that I'd been smart enough to lie about my age.

The rains would end, and when they did, Ian and I would be together, partners in the truest sense. This was a promise and an obligation I had never had in all my lives. Thinking of it made me feel joyful and anxious and shy and desperately impatient all at the same time-made me feel human.

After all this had been settled, Ian and I were more inseparable than ever. So when it came time for me to test my new face on the other souls, of course he went with me.

This raid was a relief for me after long weeks of frustration. It was bad enough that my new body was weak and nearly useless in the caves; I couldn't believe it when the others didn't want to let me use my body for the one thing it was perfect for.

Jared had specifically approved of Jamie's choice because of this guileless, vulnerable face that no one could ever doubt, this delicate build that anyone would be motivated to protect, but even he had a hard time putting his theory into practice. I was sure raiding would be every bit as easy for me now as it had been before, but Jared, Jeb, Ian, and the others-everyone but Jamie and Mel-debated for days, trying to find a way around using me for that. It was ridiculous.

I saw them eyeing Sunny, but she was still unproven, not trusted. On top of that, Sunny had absolutely no intention of setting one foot outside. The very word raid had her cowering in terror. Kyle would not go out with us; Sunny had gone hysterical the one time he'd mentioned it.

In the end, practicality had won out. I was needed.

It was good to be needed.

Supplies had been dwindling; this would be a long, thorough trip. Jared was leading the raid, as usual, so it went without saying that Melanie was included. Aaron and Brandt volunteered, not that we really needed the muscle; they were tired of being cooped up.

We were going far to the north and I was excited to see the new places-to feel the cold again

Excitement got a bit out of hand in this body. I was bouncy and hyper the night we drove to the rock slide where the van and the big moving truck were hidden. Ian was laughing at me because I could hardly hold still as we loaded the clothes and sundries we would need into the van. He held my hand, he said, to tether me to the surface of the planet.

Was I too loud? Too oblivious to my surroundings? No, of course that was not it. There was nothing I could have done. This was a trap, and it was too late for us the minute we arrived.

We froze when the thin beams of light shot out of the darkness into Jared's and Melanie's faces. My face, my eyes, the ones that might have helped us, stayed obscured, hidden in the shadow made by Ian's wide back.

My eyes were not blinded by the glare, and the moon was bright enough for me to clearly see the Seekers that outnumbered us, eight to our six. Bright enough for me to see the way they held their hands, to see the weapons that glinted in them, raised and pointed at us. Pointed at Jared and Mel, at Brandt and Aaron-our only gun still undrawn-and one centered dead on Ian's chest.

Why had I let him come with me? Why did he have to die, too? Lily's bewildered questions echoed in my head: Why did life and love go on? What was the point?

My fragile little heart shattered into a million pieces, and I fumbled for the pill in my pocket.

"Steady, now, everybody just keep calm," the man in the center of the group of Seekers called out. "Wait, wait, don't be swallowing anything! Jeez, get a grip! No, look!"

The man turned the flashlight on his own face.

His face was sun browned and craggy, like a rock that had been eroded by the wind. His hair was dark, with white at the temples, and it curled in a bushy mess around his ears. And his eyes-his eyes were dark brown. Just dark brown, nothing more.

"See?" he said. "Okay, now, you don't shoot us, and we won't shoot you. See?" And he laid the gun he was carrying to the ground. "C'mon, guys," he said, and the others slid their guns back into holsters-on their hips, their ankles, their backs... so many weapons.

"We found your cache here-clever, that; we were lucky to find it-and decided we'd hang out and make your acquaintance. It's not every day you find another rebel cell." He laughed a delighted laugh that came from deep in his belly. "Look at your faces! What? Did you think you all were the only ones still kickin'?" He laughed again.

None of us had moved an inch.

"Think they're in shock, Nate," another man said.

"We scared them half to death," a woman said. "What do you expect?"

They waited, shuffling from foot to foot, while we stood frozen.

Jared was the first to recover. "Who are you?" he whispered.

The leader laughed again. "I'm Nate-nice to meet you, though you might not feel the same way just yet. This here's Rob, Evan, Blake, Tom, Kim, and Rachel along with me." He gestured around the group as he spoke, and the humans nodded at their names. I noticed one man, a little to the back, whom Nate did not introduce. He had bright, crinkly ginger hair that stood out-especially because he was the tallest in the group. He alone seemed to be unarmed. He was also staring intently at me, so I looked away. "There's twenty-two of us altogether, though," Nate continued.

Nate held out his hand.

Jared took a deep breath and then a step forward. When he moved, the rest of our little group silently exhaled all at once.

"I'm Jared." He shook Nate's hand, then started to smile. "This is Melanie, Aaron, Brandt, Ian, and Wanda. There are thirty-seven of us altogether."

When Jared spoke my name, Ian shifted his weight, trying to obscure me completely from the other humans' view. It was only then that I realized I was still in just as much danger as the others would have been in if these had been Seekers. Just like in the beginning. I tried to hold perfectly still.

Nate blinked at Jared's revelation, and then his eyes widened. "Wow. That's the first time I've ever been one-upped on that one."

Now Jared blinked. "You've found others?"

"There are three other cells separate from ours that we know of. Eleven with Gail, seven with Russell, and eighteen with Max. We keep in touch. Even trade now and then." Again, the belly laugh. "Gail's little Ellen decided she wanted to keep company with my Evan here, and Carlos took up with Russell's Cindy. And, of course, everyone needs Burns now and then -" He stopped talking abruptly, glancing uneasily around him, as if

he'd said something he shouldn't have. His eyes rested briefly on the tall redhead in the back, who was still staring at me.

"Might as well get that out of the way," the small dark man at Nate's elbow said.

Nate shot a suspicious glance across our little line. "Okay. Rob's right. Let's get this out there." He took a deep breath. "Now, you all just take it easy and hear us out. Calmly, please. This upsets people sometimes."

"Every time," the one named Rob muttered. His hand drifted to the holster on his thigh.

"What?" Jared asked in a flat voice.

Nate sighed and then gestured to the tall man with the ginger red hair. The man stepped forward, a wry smile on his face. He had freckles, like me, only thousands more. They were scattered so thick across his face that he looked dark skinned, though he was fair. His eyes were dark-navy blue, maybe.

"This here is Burns. Now, he's with us, so don't go crazy. He's my best friend-saved my life a hundred times. He's one of our family, and we don't take kindly to it when people try to kill him."

One of the women slowly pulled her gun out and held it pointed at the ground.

The redhead spoke for the first time in a distinctly gentle tenor voice. "No, it's okay, Nate. See? They've got one of their own." He pointed straight at me, and Ian tensed. "Looks like I'm not the only one who's gone native."

Burns grinned at me, then crossed the empty space, the no-man's-land between the two tribes, with his hand stretched out toward me.

I stepped out from around Ian, ignoring his muttered warning, abruptly comfortable and sure.

I liked the way Burns had phrased it. Gone native.

Burns stopped in front of me, lowering his hand a bit to compensate for the considerable difference in our heights. I took his hand-it was hard and callused next to my delicate skin-and shook it.

"Burns Living Flowers," he introduced himself.

My eyes widened at his name. Fire World-how unexpected.

"Wanderer," I told him.

"It's... extraordinary to meet you, Wanderer. And here I thought I was one of a kind."

"Not even close," I said, thinking of Sunny back in the caves. Perhaps we were none of us as rare as we thought.

He raised an eyebrow at my answer, intrigued.

"Is that so?" he said. "Well, maybe there's some hope for this planet, after all."

"It's a strange world," I murmured, more to myself than to the other native soul.

"The strangest," he agreed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEPHENIE MEYER graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in English literature. She lives with her husband and three sons in Arizona. Read more about Stephenie and her other books at www.stepheniemeyer.com.

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