I Sing the Body Electric

by thecurlyginger

Summary

Melanie always believed she held her fate in her own hands, but meeting Oliver Bird changed her life and her perception of reality.

And it all started with a phone call.

Notes

The title and poetry throughout the story are from Walt Whitman. The rest of it is Melanie's story to tell.

See the end of the work for more notes.

The phone rang.

When Dr. Melanie Boyle Bird would tell this story decades in the future, a future with wireless phone receivers and cellphones, the significance of that phone ringing was lost. But when that phone rang, the switchboard operators had all gone home. There was no direct line to the phone in her small office in the library of the University of Redding. And yet…

The phone rang.
Melanie answered it, assuming one of her fellow professors would be on the line. It was the logical conclusion to jump to.

“Hi Melanie,” said the voice, and it was good that she already knew who was calling because for a brief moment, she only heard white noise in her ears and not, “it’s Cary Loudermilk.”

Logical conclusion? Logic had gone out the window.

Her hands shook. She could feel them clammy with sweat. “Cary? Where are you?”

It was a question she asked herself every day for two whole years, and one that surfaced to the front of her mind occasionally in the five years after. Melanie had figured he didn’t want to be found after what she asked him to do – to expose himself and Kerry, his physical other half in the form of a young girl.

Both she and Cary were undergraduate students at the university. They shared an advisor who forced the two of them together to work on their student thesis because the dean thought it too dicey for the school’s reputation for more than one thesis to be based around the mutation of the human gene. Melanie wanted to focus on the psychology of adolescents discovering their mutation whereas Cary wanted to focus on the biology of the gene – why it developed and how it affected humanity. The two struggled to fit their theses together until a trial hit national news.

Jessica O’Toole, at only 13 years old, sat before judge and jury after spikes projected from her body and impaled her father, killing him. She plead self-defense, and Melanie’s research into police reports backed the young girl up: her father had a history of disturbing the peace while drunk and was once placed into custody for waving a knife around while intoxicated, endangering the family. However, the jury found Jessica guilty of murder, and the state, weary of the girl’s powers, locked her up in a government facility.

Despite all of their digging, Melanie and Cary never found Jessica’s whereabouts. Connected to the case, the two proposed her innocence in their thesis while discussing the science behind mutants and arguing that they’re not inherently dangerous. They became fast friends, both work-oriented and impassioned by the subject. And that’s why one late night in Cary’s dimly lit dorm room, when Melanie wondered aloud the use of mutations in evolution, he revealed Kerry to her. Separating their personalities, he explained, worked as a survival tactic – brawn and brains working side by side instead of hindering each other.

His trust in her to reveal what, or who, was literally inside of him made Melanie regret her betrayal all the more.

Their thesis gained traction. After their graduation, while still donned in their caps and gowns, she proposed that they could put their work on the map and change public perspective of mutants if they did a case study on Cary and Kerry. They could prove that mutants were still human, still normal members of society. Melanie and Cary could open the public’s eyes to the reality of mutation, not the fear the government instilled in everyone. Cary never gave her an answer, nor was he seen or heard from again.

Until the phone rang.

“Where I’ve been is… exactly why I’m calling you,” Cary said, proposition in his tone. “I’ve been working with someone, Melanie, developing a place for mutants to hone and own their abilities.”

Melanie couldn’t stifle her nervous laugh. “And you couldn’t call? Or write? Anything to assure me that you didn’t hate me, or that you and Kerry weren’t locked away like Jessica? You know, her
own mother hasn’t heard from her in all these years. She thinks she’s dead.” She choked on the last word; it going unsaid that Melanie even believed that worst fate had befallen him.

“I know,” he sighed, “and that’s why I never reached out. It’s not safe for Kerry and I. But that’s the reason we’re calling: the school. We want you to come and help the younger ones. Make them feel safe, help undo the damage society is causing them.”

“And whom are you working with?”

She hung on for a beat of silence.

“I can’t say yet, for his safety,” Cary answered.

Melanie thought she had to be dreaming. She needed a reality check, so she gave one to the both of them: “Look, even if I wanted to help… The University owns my doctorate. I agreed to teach here for four more years in exchange for them to cover my tuition costs. My curriculum to teach mutant developments and their effect on the human psychosis hasn’t been approved yet, so I’m only been teaching traditional adolescent psychology for now. And Cary… I’m not a mutant. Who’s going to want to listen to some quack who can’t truly empathize with them?”

There. That had to be the end of it.

“Money isn’t a factor. He’ll pay to break your contract with the school.”

“I’ll lose my accreditation,” she argued, her head in her hand. He was always stubborn to prove his point; some things never changed.

Cary offered that it could be arranged for her to join a different, more prestigious university, should things go south. She asked if the mystery man was Charles Xavier, recalling Cary’s fascination with the man. Years ago, Melanie had begged Cary to write to Xavier, to show he had a fellow academic fighting the good fight. But Cary never believed himself worthy of Xavier’s guidance, and Kerry – so young and so sheltered – had reservations around strangers.

“Melanie, listen. It’s not Xavier. You can come and see it for yourself.” He sensed her about to cut in, so he continued forcefully. “Just see the place. No strings attached or obligations. We’ll send a driver.”

“I can drive myself,” she retorted, laughing in disbelief. As if she’d trust being driven to a remote location.

To further her disbelief, she heard a man chuckling in the background. A musical laugh, as if she had just told him the sky were raining gumdrops.

Cary cleared his throat. “He says that’s fine. We’ll get a map down to you soon.”

It was thus arranged – she would visit in two weeks during the school’s spring break. She thought Cary was about to hang up, about to leave her again in a cloud of smoke and confusion.

“Wait,” she interjected, “do you trust this man, Cary?”

“We trust him.”

Though the phone call ended, Melanie still held the receiver to her ear, lost in the mystery that her life was becoming.
The next two weeks were spent preparing. Melanie received an envelope at her apartment in the women’s dormitory, but the envelope didn’t have postage or a return address - only her name written in a hand she didn’t recognize as Cary’s. It must have been sent with a delivery service, she deduced, but why go to such lengths and expenses to remain anonymous? Even Charles Xavier was reachable during his university residences.

In between keeping up with grading papers and maintaining office hours, she looked up public record of Cary Loudermilk to no avail. Her last resort was going to the bursar, but no forwarding address or record of Cary was left behind other than that he was accepted to the graduate program to study biophysics but deferred admission after already submitting his deposit. Melanie already knew this. She just didn’t know how he managed to vanish.

On the Friday before her road trip north to, based on the red marker’s X on her destination, the middle of nowhere in the forest, Melanie did the unthinkable and called her mother.

Rachel Seymour, remarried after the death of Melanie’s father, shared a strained relationship with her daughter. Despite all that Melanie did to make her mother proud, Rachel was convinced she was making the wrong choice for her life in the long run. Melanie could have been married by now, had children, and been settled instead of chasing a rabbit-hole career following the sad, broken people Rachel thought mutants were and the families they destroyed.

But Melanie had to put that behind her that Friday to ask, “Would you take a risk to follow your dreams?”

“What?” Rachel scoffed. “There are no risks if the dream is right for you. Just actions. Is this about that professor? Did you change your mind?”

“No, Mother,” Melanie answered, sternness dripping in her voice. Knowing that the conversation would not veer in any civilized direction if she explained her dilemma further, she just told her mother that she would be gone for a few days on a research trip in the forest off the interstate.

Disinterested, her mom didn’t put up an argument. “If you must endanger yourself venturing out into the wilderness just to prove that you’re better than your mother, that’s fine.”

“It’s… it’s not the wilderness,” Melanie said defensively, but her mother already hung up.

Blinking her bleary eyes, Melanie continued to stare at the map in her office, its light the only one illuminated in the library at that late hour. The map was already memorized, practically engrained to her eyeballs, but she didn’t feel tired at all. Everything she was about to do felt wrong; it made her anxious. As if she tensely willed a voice to convince her either way, the phone rang again.

“How are you doing that?” She answered, knowing it could have only been Cary, unless the man would at last reveal himself…

“He wants to know if you have any more doubts about tomorrow.” Ah, it was just Cary.

Weighing her options, Melanie considered backing out. She wanted to say it was her stubbornness and pride that eventually convinced her to move forward, but deep inside, she knew that it was her hope driving her, telling her that maybe she could turn her life back onto course and help the people she sought to help. That set aside, Melanie Boyle was a very educated woman, and she would not be careless with this journey. Nor would she belittle the idea that she might finally reunite with her long
lost friend.

“Is there hot water?” Her humor took them both off edge. If she tried, she could imagine them back in his old dorm room, laughing while sitting on the floor littered in research papers.

“You’re not roughing it in the forest, Melanie,” Cary said in a jovial tone. “And, because I know you’re going to ask, there will be no knives necessary.”

She feigned disappointment, and she could hear through the receiver that man’s laughter again – the rise and fall of it. It wiped the smile off her face, replacing it with unease. He then said something to Cary that she couldn’t make out.

“He wants leaves of grass,” and before Melanie could question Cary, he continued. “Sleep well tonight. The roads are tricky. Be careful.”

She recognized that tone, the same tone Cary used when he let Kerry do something out of her, or more likely his, comfort level. His concern put Melanie at back ease, if only slightly.

“I will, thank you.”

And as if hit by a crashing wave of melatonin, Melanie could barely keep her eyes open. Her movements mechanical, she felt like she was floating through the campus back to her room. Melanie woke at dawn hardly remembering how she got back to her bed. She dressed silently, decided she wasn’t hungry, and took her travel bags down to the parking lot.

There she found leaves pushed against the fence in the wind. Though there wasn’t time if she wanted to stick to the schedule of her long drive, she wandered over to a patch of grass. Leaves of grass…

It struck her like lightening: Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*! Blinking, she recalled grabbing the book in her exhausted stupor last night. Melanie pulled it from her bag. Why would he want a poetry collection? Or was he being more literal and just wanted some foliage? One couldn’t make assumptions about a man shrouded in such mystery, obviously. So, always thorough with her scholastic assignments, Melanie considered every option. She picked one dried leaf and one that appeared to have just fallen from a tree and placed them safely between the book’s pages before setting off onto the highway.

An exact woman, Melanie made only one stop on her journey. It was planned and multifaceted. For one, she could feel the hunger pangs distracting her mind from the thousands of questions and scenarios that cycled through her thoughts. That was easily solved when she seated herself in the diner off the interstate, the leather of the booth creaking slightly beneath her.

The menu was placed before her by a woman in a bright pink dress and white apron, her nametag reading “Betty.” A pleasant face and cheery voice, despite the early hour, was paired with the name.

“Just toast and coffee, dear?” Betty asked.

“Yes, please. I’m not sure I can stomach much else,” Melanie answered candidly.

She reminded herself that it was natural to be nervous. It made the toast go down easier.

The second purpose of her stop was to freshen up, so she asked Betty where the restroom was. Fortunately, the door had a lock, and Melanie could apply her makeup in private.
While not vain, she worked at a university – a predominately male work field - and knew how looks affected treatment toward her. During her undergrad career when paired with a male for a project, if she didn’t look presentable, he wouldn’t give her the time of day. It may not have been her focus of study, but Melanie knew it was somehow wired in men’s brains that women had to look conventionally attractive to earn any respect.

Her skin powdered an even tone and her lips a pale pink, she looked the part. Melanie strode to her table and called Betty over under the pretense of asking about the forest she would be “camping” in.

“It’s beautiful, especially at night. But to answer your question, I don’t know of anyone tearing it up or anything to build there. And my, don’t you look very put together for someone going camping! Trying to impress someone, hm?” Betty’s spirited tone made Melanie smirk, furthering the image of her role.

“In a way,” she led on and took her bag to signify her departure.

A hefty tip on the table and that amiable conversation secured Melanie’s third purpose of stopping – she made a meaningful impression on someone along the way should something go awry and she go missing. That was the thousandth and last scenario that Melanie had going through her mind as she drove the last 45 minutes. There were no more rest stops, fewer and fewer cars on the road, and the path became curvy around the forest. She was getting close.

Three miles past the Viewpoint Road turn-off, she reviewed in her head, practically seeing the map before her eyes, the road would veer left, but she had to drive straight into the clearing. It seemed simple, only when it was before her, she felt the temptation to stop. Go back.

Leave. Get out of here.

The voice wasn’t hers; it sounded distorted, like it was being said with a pillow covering her ears.

Suddenly, the car started rolling over the rocks and foliage, the bumps startling Melanie out of her reverie, the ominous warning discarded. She pumped the brake to slow down the vehicle, hearing the leaves crunching underneath the tires, the low rumble of the engine, and her own breathing. Out of nowhere, a road appeared. Melanie took the path, not knowing what to expect at the end of it.

She certainly didn’t expect a grand structure with huge windows and a wooden patio overlooking the forest and its humble lake. Cary stood at the end of a driveway, and a figure walked down the balcony steps leisurely to join him. Melanie slowed her car to a stop in the driveway and turned off the ignition. She glanced at her eyes in the rearview mirror – a grounding technique of hers – and caught her breath before stepping out of the car.

The steps Cary took toward her were tentative, so Melanie closed the space between them and hugged him tightly. “For what it’s worth,” she said, pleased when his discomfort at their physical contact slipped away, “I’m sorry for asking you to—”

“That’s enough of that,” he said, pulling away to reveal the smile on his face, which Melanie eagerly returned. “We’ll have time to catch up later.” Cary turned to the man now beside them, and Melanie took in his presence.

Tall, though not menacing in stature, he wore pale orange pants and a matching jacket… A bit loud for what Melanie would expect from someone going through such lengths to hide. His dark hair was long, his beard well groomed. Appearance clearly meant a lot to him; he seemed to be looking at hers as well with pursed lips, an expression she couldn’t read.
“I’m Melanie Boyle,” she said, breaking the silence.

“Yes, yes you are Doctor Boyle. Don’t sell yourself short! I’m honored you decided to join us.” His accent surprised her at first, but Melanie ultimately found it fitting for his entire suave image. “New Zealand, since you’re going to ask,” he added with a nod.

Melanie inclined her head curtly. “How interesting. Now, who is this ‘us’ I’m joining?”

“Why,” he chuckled, the same chuckle she heard before now more melodic sounding without the phone’s resonance, “it’s Cary, Kerry, and myself – Oliver Bird, at your service.”

So he knew about Kerry. Perhaps Cary did trust this man. But did he put his trust in the right person?

“I’m sure you have many questions,” Oliver continued, “but you should settle in and get comfortable. There is a lot to see here at Summerland.”

If Melanie could have trusted him with anything, it was with that. She had plenty in store to see.

Oliver led the way to Melanie’s accommodations, giving a brief tour of the facility along the way. Though still a work in progress with many rooms bare, the kitchen and main living area were spacious and gorgeous with views into the forest, gentle lighting, and tall ceilings. The two peeked into a room with bunks – over a dozen of them.

“I presume this is for the… Well, I’m not sure what to call them. Hopefully not test subjects or prisoners,” she half-jested.

“Students,” Oliver offered, “but with no age limit. We’re all students of life, after all.”

She couldn’t decide if he exuded elegance or arrogance. But perhaps if it were the latter, it was only as a defense mechanism against her judgments. Either way, she thought as they walked down a more private hallway, they couldn’t sustain this dynamic if they were to become colleagues.

“That reminds me: I presume you brought the—“

“Oh yes,” said Melanie, removed from her train of thought. She pulled the book from her shoulder bag. “Leaves of Grass, in all sense of the words.”

Opening the tome, she revealed the two leaves she picked up this morning. “In case this is one of those ‘think outside the box’ tests.” Melanie attempted a real grin then.

“Exquisite.” A smile pulled at Oliver’s lips as he hummed in contemplation.

Melanie stood there, unsure if he meant her work or her. The second option unsettled her. The man was a flirt, and while harmless for now, she didn’t want to let her guard down.

“Why were you so secretive? Why have Cary call me?” Her voice echoed loudly in the cramped hallway. Perhaps this wasn’t the place to have this conversation.

“I’m not a fugitive, if that’s what you’re wondering.” Oliver’s voice didn’t sound angry or offended. Perhaps a little tired. “I’m just trying to stay incognito after my last fiasco. It turns out, trying to collaborate for the greater good of mutant-kind isn’t always met with zealousness.”

Melanie’s eyes narrowed. “What does that mean exactly?”
“Some people are out to get me.” His voice remained cool, which had an adverse effect on her.

“Should I be worried?”

“For me? Ah, I’m flattered—”

“For myself,” she interrupted, arms crossed.

Oliver’s eyes, filled with sincerity, locked with hers. “I wouldn’t wish any harm to come to you. I have worked for years to keep this facility and everyone in it safe.”

As he gestured to a room on the right and opened the door, Melanie believed he was telling the truth. The truth remained, however, that he couldn’t promise that safety.

Twenty minutes until her formal tour of the facility with Cary and Oliver, and Melanie didn’t know what to do first. Survey her room? It looked normal – a bed, desk, closet, and bathroom attached. The door had a lock. She used the washroom and looked at her reflection while washing her hands. She still appeared put together, though she situated a few flyaway hairs before hanging up her clothing.

The silk shirt she wore stuck to her skin, slightly damp with sweat from her nerves. She started to unbutton it but turned around the room quickly. Money was no object for Oliver and he was concerned about safety. Did he have surveillance around Summerland? Were there cameras in the room?

It seemed like a stretch; if it were truly just Cary and Oliver there, how would they find the time to review the tapes? Melanie shook her head. She was being silly. Cary told her he trusted Oliver, so she should too. Perhaps with time she could learn to. The blouse would remain on, though. Baby steps.

“I told you she was punctual,” Cary said smiling as Melanie emerged before twenty minutes passed.

She found them in the dining room eating delectable-looking pastries and sipping their espressos. The luxury of such a breakfast while hours from the nearest city baffled Melanie.

“Can I offer you anything? We have food delivered here weekly. The pastries are fresh,” said Oliver, gesturing to the fine spread.

Melanie declined, mentioning that she ate on the road.

“Ah yes, I apologize for your taxing journey,” he said, nodding.

Looking to Cary for help in conversing but receiving only a shrug from her old friend in return, she cleared her throat, lost for words. “Should we begin the tour?”

Taking one final sip from his dainty espresso cup, Oliver removed himself from the table and beckoned for them to follow him through the expansive building. Stepping into Cary’s lab filled Melanie with joy. It was pilled with equipment, both medical and experimental – a field day for him, she knew.

“Cary, this is hospital grade stuff,” she said, impressed.
He beamed with pride. “Health and safety is paramount here, we’re making sure of it.”

The next room was empty with a large window offering natural light. Melanie wandered it, her modest heels tapping against the hardwood floor. Why did they stop here?

Oliver turned to her like a showman on the game shows her father used to watch. “This could be your office or space, or whatever you’d like to call it.”

Melanie took this in, imagining the possibilities.

“A desk, a chair or two – Italian leather, perhaps – and you can help the students reach their full potential.” Oliver’s words seemed to float around her.

Striding toward the window she looked out then turned around to face the space. Cary and Oliver watched her, but her eyes were unseeing of their expectant looks. Before her was only her potential.

For the first time since she started teaching at the University, Melanie was enthralled.

“Well?” Cary asked.

“It’s certainly…” Melanie blinked, catching herself holding back, and let go. “It’s what I want. It’s the opportunity I never thought I could have.”

Oliver clapped his hands. “Great, so it’s settled! Let’s have a drink then.”

“But why me?” Melanie’s brow furrowed as her mind turned the idea around. The room fell silent. “Why not someone more established? Someone who’s not going to lose you money on breaking a contract with an institution? Oliver, even if money’s not an issue of yours, you can see that this doesn’t make any sense.”

Oliver walked toward her, his legs moving with languid purpose. “Why you, Doctor Boyle? Because I know you.”

Before she could question him, a person appeared out of nowhere and stood in the middle of the room, their back turned from Melanie. She jumped, yelping. It took only seconds to recognize the University of Redding school colors, the bronze cap and gown. The figured turned to Melanie, and she gasped.

“What the hell?”

Melanie backed against the wall, her blood cold in her veins. She had seen a ghost.

She had seen herself.

“Cary, if you don’t mind,” Oliver said, and Cary left the room wordlessly.

Melanie panicked and called out to the door. “No, no, don’t leave me here with him!”

“Relax, Melanie, relax. The door is unlocked; you can leave at any time.”

She took deep breaths. “How are you inside my mind?”

“I’m not technically inside your mind. This is Cary’s memory of you – his last memory of you, in fact. I’ve only projected it onto your optic nerve so that your brain thinks it’s what you’re seeing,” Oliver explained in a tone that was meant to be reassuring.
To Melanie, however... “Again, how?”

“Cary has his ability, and I have mine. I’m a sort of psychic, a conglomeration of telepathy and more. I can venture inside the human mind, see things, change things, and get songs stuck in people’s heads.” His attempt at humor didn’t fly over well. Power exuded from Oliver, but he didn’t raise a hand or even an eyebrow in his efforts of projecting the image. The lack of visual cue for the use of his powers scared Melanie the most.

“Are you reading my mind now?” She asked, her eyes still darting between Oliver and the past version of herself, eight years younger.

Oliver moved even closer to the real Melanie, so close that as he stood by her side, their arms almost grazed each other. She watched him cautiously. “No, I won’t read your mind until you permit me to. Cary gave me permission to see you, to meet you, through him when he was telling me that you’d be a good fit here. I know you through what Cary saw in you, and I think you’re remarkable, Melanie.”

Young Melanie waved her diploma; the real Melanie recalled her elation at having finished the first milestone in her academic career, at having thought she would go forward and save the lives of mutants if she just got her doctorate degree.

“That’s not me,” Melanie said firmly, pushing off the wall and toward the door.

Oliver was right. The door wasn’t locked; she fought back sighing in relief. Cary stood outside, having overheard everything. He took a step out of the way to clear a path for her, but she gestured for him to enter.

“You both need to know this about me – I’m a sell-out.”

With a shaky breath, Melanie elaborated. The University didn’t let her continue with her mutant studies focus during her doctorate career. They couldn’t risk their reputation with her biased standpoint after the public and the government continued to turn against mutants. They offered she could study for her degree in adolescent psychology so long as she took an unbiased viewpoint in any reference to mutants and kept her head down.

“And I agreed. I sold out to them because it benefitted me. They paid my entire tuition, and that’s all it took to persuade me. That, and the idea that maybe I would open my practice down the line. But I let them own me, even for years after graduating, because I thought it was okay to help myself instead of the people like both of you who are being persecuted because of who you are.” She looked at Cary, catching his sad gaze. “You don’t know who I am anymore, Cary.”

Melanie excused herself to her room after that, thankful that the vision of her younger-self didn’t follow. There she sat on her bed, alone but unable to wipe her confession and their reaction from her mind. She could’ve really used Oliver’s powers then. A clean slate. Lying on her side toward the window, she thought of his promise to not read her mind without permission.

A polite psychic. Who would have thought?

What would it feel like, she wondered, to have him in her mind? Intimate, like sharing a secret? Creepy, like knowing someone’s lurking in the shadows?

The sun started to set. Though not really hungry, Melanie headed out to the kitchen to grab something to eat. Part of her wanted to apologize for wasting their time; she couldn't un-see their
dejected faces from when she told them the truth. Another part of her wanted to sneak in and out without being seen.

When she made it to the kitchen, she saw Oliver sitting, his eyes toward her. So much for not being seen. But upon closer inspection, Melanie realized his staring eyes were looking past her. He was catatonic. Perhaps something related to his powers, she thought. Not wanting to disturb him, she grabbed a leftover pastry and an apple from the fresh fruit bowl and snuck back into her room.

After her snack, she decided it best that she try to sleep, but sleep wouldn’t claim her. Melanie turned away from the window and toward the door when she heard a light tap against the wood and the shadow of feet in the crack underneath. She got up, nervous. Was it Oliver? Dressed in only a nightgown, she didn’t want to talk to him about what she might have seen.

“Open up Mel, it’s Kerry!”

Relieved, Melanie opened the door and let the young girl nearly knock her over with the force of her hug. Kerry was older, looking to be about seven. It had been eight years since Melanie last saw her, and back then, she looked to be about four or five.

“You’ve been out a lot here, haven’t you?” Melanie asked.

Kerry lifted Melanie’s hands into position and started playing their old hand clapping game. “Cary says it’s safe, so I can run and play here.”

“Do you feel safe?” Melanie felt nominally guilty for questioning a young girl but knew children to be more honest than adults.

Kerry nodded and proceeded to go on and on about how Oliver had so many stories inside his head that he liked to tell her, fairytales and old stories about farmers and villagers that didn’t have names but spoke truths. “He calls them folktales! And he lets me read some of his books but the other books are old and have brown pages and smell funny.”

“When I saw Cary last,” Melanie started, treading carefully, “he seemed sad. Is he happy now?”

“He’s happy now that you’re here because now you can bring in other kids, and I’m happy because then I can play with other kids!” Her claps grew stronger with her excitement, so much that they started to make Melanie’s hands sting, and she had to pull her hands away.

Kerry was getting stronger.

So much remained an enigma regarding Kerry. Melanie thought it a shame she couldn’t stay and study the girl, and a bigger shame that they couldn’t spend more time together, feeling a sisterly bond with her. The guilt that hit her like a wave the moment Cary entered her room solidified her sentiments.

“You need to sleep,” he said to Kerry. “And you do too, Mel.”

Melanie looked up and saw the worry on his face. “I will, and I’ll get out of your hair early tomorrow. I’m sorry for wasting your time.”

“We’re – I’m – not upset with you Melanie,” Cary said.

“I saw the looks on your faces,” she said defiantly, though still solemn. “You didn’t seem tickled pink once I told you the truth.”
Kerry looked between them, worried to see them fight, so Cary absorbed her. “I was upset that you thought we wouldn’t want you here. Neither of us is surprised with what happened. Obviously if everything worked out the way you envisioned it when we were in college, you’d have a renowned practice by now. Our fight isn’t easy, so you can’t feel so upset with yourself that it’s taking so long.”

“It’s hard not to when you’ve been avoiding me since I got here. When are we going to talk about what happened?” She asked, crossing her arms and stepping toward him. “I came here for you, not for Oliver or his money.”

Cary ran a hand through his messy hair. “Oliver is going into town tomorrow. We can talk then. Now, sleep.”

He left Melanie alone with more questions than answers, but feeling a little better.

“Our fight,” Cary had said. Melanie truly wanted to fight it.

Having forgotten to close the curtains in her room, Melanie awoke squinting against the rising sun. She seized her opportunity and took a leisurely shower, the hot water welcome to wash away yesterday’s events. At last she would finally have some answers about Cary – an exciting prospect. Her hands shook as they dried off her body, betraying her cool demeanor. Fine, she could admit she was nervous as well, and desperate to hear everything. Melanie made quick work of making herself presentable and headed to the kitchen.

Cary leaned against the counter, all lanky limbs and disheveled appearance, juxtaposing Oliver completely. While Oliver could be the face of an empire, be it one of politics or even fashion, Cary looked the part of a scientist. His clothes seemed to have never been pressed in their existence, let alone recently. But Melanie still looked at him and saw her close friend. Though she had other friends in Redding, especially in his absence to fill the void he left, Cary’s brand of enthusiasm saved for scientific breakthroughs could never be replaced.

“Coffee?” He offered, leading her to a machine. “It’s a work in progress, but here, check it out. What do you want?”

“A cappuccino, if possible,” she said to Cary.

The machine responded “Of course,” in Oliver’s voice, and proceeded to brew the espresso and steam the milk.

“ Incredible,” Melanie said with awe.

Cary nodded. “It’s Oliver’s invention. Ingenious really. He’s working to make it a social machine. The water cooler for the caffeine deficient.”

Feigning nonchalance, Melanie took her drink and sipped it slowly before asking, “Where is he?”

Taking care of business, Cary told her. Oliver had to meet with his contractors and lawyers. He often executed his business on Sundays and during holiday seasons, she learned, to ensure discreetness. Cary didn’t say as such, but Melanie knew that had to be expensive.

“Cary, I know you had trouble with paying off school. Did you leave because Oliver…?”

“I-I’d really rather have this conversation outside,” Cary stuttered. “It’s stuffy in here.”
As they wandered to the other side of the facility, Melanie regretted not biting her tongue. Cary’s financial burden weighed on him; he confided it to her years ago. His parents’ divorce meant covering the cost of tuition between his mother and father caused a lot of tension, and he hated adding that extra strain. She should have known better to bring up such a touchy subject.

They walked in silence the entire way along the lake, through a clearing, and to a small dock. Cary offered her a seat. Melanie took it, moving to the far edge so he could sit comfortably as well. With his long legs, their knees still touched. They sat in silence for a while, tempting Melanie to say something to break the ice, but eventually he spoke while looking calmly out to the water.

“I was scared back then when you wanted us to be part of your case study, you know? Kerry would have done it because it was you, and I probably would have, too. But I was afraid they’d take us away like they took Jessica. I was given the same offer from the University that you were; I could study for free and have the resources I wanted to study mutant DNA on the side, even if I had to do so discretely and teach for a while. Confining, sure, but how could I say no? All I needed was money and half a chance, so I emptied my bank account the day of our undergrad graduation to pay the tuition deposit they needed to make sure I was serious. I planned to hash things out with you the next day.”

But that clearly didn’t happen. The next day, Kerry, restless, wanted to go to the park, so Cary took her there first. He kept a close eye on her, but didn’t see until it was too late that a man with wild, curly hair and murky blue eyes grabbed her. He didn’t run with her but pulled her forcefully over to Cary while she cried. The man said that “freaks” weren’t allowed in the park, but he had a nice place for the two of them.

“I looked for help, but the park emptied out completely. It was a façade, a trap, like we had been watched for a while. I think our thesis garnered some negative attention, Mel. I thought that was it, but then the man just collapsed, and Oliver appeared out of nowhere. We ran to his car and drove away.”

In the car, Oliver explained to Cary that he was keeping tabs on that man for years and believed he worked for the same government subsection that had taken Jessica and other mutants away. But while Oliver could block the image of himself from the man’s mind and hide in plain sight, it wouldn’t be so easy for Cary and Kerry unless they stuck with him. Others might follow behind Walter, Oliver warned.

Cary looked to Melanie at last. She sat, captivated by his story, scared for him. “I told him,” said Cary, “that we’re not a threat. That I don’t have ‘powers.’ And Oliver told me, ‘It doesn’t matter. We’re different, and that’s all it takes for them to hate us.’”

He and Oliver drove to Summerland, only at the time it was still an abandoned horse ranch that Oliver inherited, and it was only to act as a safe house until they had another option. It had electricity and plumbing, a phone, but that was it. Cary wanted to reach out to Melanie—his only friend—but the phone lines weren’t secure, and after Cary told him about Melanie, Oliver thought that Melanie could be at risk too if she was on “their” side. He had to vanish.

And thus, Summerland would become a safe haven for them and, Oliver believed, other mutants.

Both geniuses and finding kindred spirits in one another, they worked together to make the land secure. They staged an electrical fire and paid Oliver’s estate lawyers to forge papers that said the land didn’t belong to Oliver but rather his sister who lived in Paris and wanted a vacation home, “that she rarely visited, of course,” Cary joked.

“And it was just the two of you the entire time?” Melanie asked.
“Not always,” Cary offered. “He brought in consultants, contractors, and even scientists who studied mutants in secrecy. They’d work, even stay for a while, but this place is a commitment not everyone is cut out to make. People worry about their families, themselves, in this political age. And can you blame them? Someone tried to take a young girl from the park! A girl who just wanted to play and be normal.”

Melanie placed her hand on his knee. She couldn’t say she knew what he had gone through, and that killed her, but she comforted him in solidarity.

“You must get lonely, Cary,” she told him, shaking her head.

She should have been there, was what went unsaid.

“A little,” he laughed. “Oliver left as we starting building Summerland when his sister Catherine found out he flubbed the will.”

“Bad blood?” Melanie asked, intrigued.

“Catherine didn’t like the image of her taking anything from her father’s estate,” Cary shrugged, not sharing Melanie’s interest. “He came back with a girlfriend then and a few times since, but they leave too. It takes a special person to understand that Summerland is his life now. Oliver wants to protect and train and… nurture mutants like me. Keep them safe.”

Melanie smiled but felt her lip quiver. “I’m glad you told me everything,” she said shakily. Cary tried to shush her and calm her down, but she shook her head. “I gave up on you. I know you’re safe, and I did look for you I promise. But just knowing that I stopped looking after a couple of years when you were fine this whole time, working and being productive, just makes me feel selfish. Maybe I’m not cut out to help others like I thought I could.”

Cary held his arms out for a hug, which meant Melanie must have looked like she really needed it. Accepting his invitation, she held him tightly and could feel Kerry pulling her close, even as Cary and Kerry were still united.

“Melanie, you came here.” His words vibrated through her as he spoke with his jaw on her back in the embrace. “You’re stubborn as all hell, so obviously you knew it was the right thing to do or else you’d be back in Redding. Even if you decide this isn’t right for you, you took a calculated risk coming here. I think you know deep inside that even the idea of helping mutants is worth the life you have to give.”

Melanie nodded, pulling away from the hug. Her throat choked on words, but with Cary, she could let her gratitude go unspoken. In his glassy eyes, she saw their truce, their friendship rekindled.

Finally when she could speak, she turned to Cary. “By the way, I’m not stubborn.”

They both laughed, and momentarily, Melanie forgot the stress and anxiety that precluded their moment on the dock. Her mother’s words flashed suddenly: “There are no risks if the dream is right for you.”

But that was still a loaded decision to be made, one that could be made later. So instead, Melanie rested her head on Cary’s shoulder and looked toward the water with him. It lapped against the dock, the sound calming and serene. The spring breeze that occasionally floated through cooled her stinging eyes.

After some time, Melanie heard a throat clearing behind them. “As I see my soul reflected in nature,” Oliver recited, “as I see through a mist one with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty.”
Melanie turned to him. “You’ve been crying,” he said concerned. “I didn’t know Cary was such a heartbreaker.”

Oliver’s attempt to break the tension worked. Melanie found herself giggling while blinking away any remaining tears.

“We were just catching up. I didn’t know how much I missed! Renegades on the run?” She asked with a jovial tone, hoping for some reaction.

Oliver shrugged modestly but flashed a debonair grin. “I’ll have to tell you the story one day. My version has more tuxedos, martinis, and flashy getaway cars.” He cleared his throat again, looking between her and Cary. “If you need more time, please don’t let me interrupt. I just wanted to show you a room we missed yesterday before it became too late in the day.”

Both men looked to her for an answer. She blushed under the attention. “Yes, of course.”

Oliver extended a hand to her. Melanie took it, her hand feeling small in his larger one, and let him effortlessly pull her up. While brushing the dirt from her clothing, she watched him pat Cary on the back and tell him that something had been taken care of. She inquired.

“Our machinery is blowing the fuses,” said Cary. “We need more power, more generators.”

“I’ve just come back from placing a down payment for that and,” Oliver said, looking directly at Melanie, “from seeing my lawyer. I’ve drawn up a contract for you, if you’d like to take a look.”

She swallowed. “You still want me here after what I said yesterday?”

Oliver, unfazed by her question, bowed his head and explained as if explaining the obvious, “You’re qualified, and you’re still standing here which means you haven’t changed your mind. Therefore—“

“Right,” she interrupted, “therefore please keep the contract for now. I want my decision to be intrinsic and not influenced by money.”

Melanie watched him nod in approval before walking toward the main property. Cary walked beside him, discussing their new generators, while she followed a short distance behind to give them space.

Clearing the air with Cary made her footsteps feel lighter. Certainly that explained the smile pulling at her lips and not Oliver’s regard for her.

Certainly she wasn’t thinking about Oliver after excusing herself to her room to collect herself. She definitely wasn’t embarrassed about her delight in earning his approval or curious about the poetry he recited while she dabbed a cool washcloth against her cheek to make her face appear less blotchy and less like she sobbed a short while ago. When she left the washroom, she spotted the Leaves of Grass book on her desk. Oliver must have returned it to her when she and Cary were by the lake.

Picking up the book, Melanie skimmed through the pages but thought it fruitless – she’d never find those two short lines of poetry in a book hundreds of pages long so quickly.

Abandoning that mission, she journeyed out toward the living room space, only to find no sign of Cary or Oliver. Melanie wandered down the path they took yesterday, finally hearing their voices. Approaching a corridor, she could make out Oliver apologizing.

“-for hurting the flow.”

“You think—Nothing’s changed,” Cary laughed. “You know I’m not-that I’m not interested in romance or sex or any of it. But clearly you two are—“
She walked away, overwhelmed. Were they talking about her? Oliver must have asked about her and Cary... Melanie shook her head, feeling her cheeks flush again but not from the crying. She couldn’t stay away forever, though, and walked a little further back the way she came before calling out, “Hello?”

Oliver emerged, followed by Cary, both acting oblivious, so she followed suit, pretending to be lost.

“I hope you’re feeling refreshed, Melanie,” Oliver said. She nodded, not trusting her voice in such an awkward situation. Ever the academic, she concluded that his interest in any possible romance between her and Cary was only in ensuring there to be no conflicts of interest. That thought made it easier for her to look at the two of them.

Oliver led her into a room. A circular window showed the sun starting its descent, and a few tasteful lights illuminated the space. In the center taking up most of the room sat a large, metallic table with… handles?

“The metal conducts thermal energy,” explained Cary, “and helps physically connect whoever’s sitting at it, giving better access to, say, a psychic.”

Oliver cut in. “You see, as a round table, it allows joint telepathic access into someone’s mind.”

Melanie walked along it, looking underneath for any wiring, but it was as described – simply a table.

“Why would you need joint access?” She questioned.

“The mind is a frightening place. Walls can be put up to block people, and sometimes you need guidance. It’s not a door in and out. If we were to look inside Cary’s mind, he could place barriers around me in the form of memories and distractions, and I would need your help to remind me what’s real or else we’d be trapped inside.” Oliver’s description made perfect sense.

Melanie considered, staring past them in thought. “Say a child sits here, having thought he or she is too dangerous to be a member of normal society. We could go inside and see what’s caused their trauma and use therapy to aid them.”

“Yes we could,” Cary said. “That’s why I told Oliver we needed you. He and I can watch their memories, but we’re not qualified to offer help the way you are.”

She touched the cool table. This would be a whole new kind of evaluating patients – a breakthrough in child psychology, giving adolescents the exact therapy they needed based on their individual thoughts and experiences.

“It’s a lot to think about,” Oliver said, breaking her from her thoughts. “Let’s put it aside for now and have dinner.”

Even as they left the room, Melanie found her thoughts returning to the room with endless possibilities.

Dinner continued to smooth things over for the three. Oliver made steak, and Melanie insisted she at least make a salad. He asked Cary to grab a bottle of wine from the cellar, and she sputtered with laughter.

“You have barely any decorations, let alone furniture, and yet you’ve got a wine cellar?” She asked, incredulous.

“I’m a man of many tastes, most of them focused on my taste buds,” he countered.
Mirth was a good fit for them. It eased Melanie’s mind off making decisions and being so far away from the life she built for herself in Redding. It brought comfort.

They ate in peace, Cary and Melanie dominating the conversation with his questions about their old friends and colleagues and her thorough detailing of the last few years.

“And your mother?” He asked.

Melanie hummed mid-sip of the smooth red wine they enjoyed. “Disappointed in me as usual.”

Her tone wasn’t sad; in fact she thought it sounded drained, devoid of energy to care. Yet Oliver seemed suddenly fixated on her.

“Why?”

“I’m too progressive for my mother.” The heady wine loosened her lips more than intended. “She would rather see me married and laden down with children instead of chasing a career into the forest.”

“I think,” Oliver started after finishing the last of his glass, “that your ambition is a redeeming trait, refreshing, especially in a woman.”

The air felt thick to Melanie. If she opened her mouth again… Thankfully, Cary yawned and offered to clean up.

“No, let me,” Melanie insisted. “It’s the least I can do faced with such hospitality.”

She wanted them both to leave so should could focus on washing dishes and clearing her head, but Oliver held back to help. Fortunately they worked in silence, which reminded her of his state, his overall existence or lack thereof, the night before when she wandered to the kitchen, and she had to ask him, stating what she saw.

“It was like you were staring off into space.”

A corner of Oliver’s mouth turned up, his interest peaking with her curiosity. “It was a sort of space. An astral plane. I can build what I want to build there, see clearly where the real world blinds me.”

“What are you building?” Melanie asked, assuming it would be more metal tables and lab equipment.

“Summerland. I can see it all in my mind: people, technology, and innovation. And I can see you there, bright and clear as day.”

Oliver looked at her, earnest but not desperate. Searching for a reaction from her. Melanie took a glass and filled it with cold water, not wanting to flub her words under the influence of a little wine.

“Oliver, I’m… I’m starting to see myself here too, truly, but there are things we need to do first. Things that I need to do first, like evaluate you.” Melanie watched him for a reaction, not expecting that he would actually balk at her.

“You think I’m damaged or unstable because I’m a mutant?” He asked defensively but with an ice-cold voice that exuded dominance.

Melanie shook her head in disagreement. “No, but I would be if I didn’t know my employer for certain before becoming the third partner in what’s clearly a very hands on experiment on all of our parts.” He still looked like he had his doubts, so she continued. “You talk so much, boast about your
experiences, spout poetry, but say so little about yourself, Oliver.”

He held her eye, evaluating before finally relenting to sit with her the next day.

“If you want to get a head start,” he said, walking away, “you’ll understand me a bit more once you’ve read the works of Walt Whitman.”

The book sat heavy in her lap. Ready for bed, she sat against propped pillows, the lamp beside her the only light on in the room. No use delaying. Melanie opened *Leaves of Grass* and became swept up in its flowery language and romanticism. She could vividly see Oliver picking up the book and identifying with it instantly, delving in with that wry smile of his, reciting the words with his gravely drawl.

She looked up from the book promptly, her heart racing, excited by the thought. Melanie felt warm, the thick heat of arousal engulfing her entire body. But it was just the poetry, she reminded herself. She was projecting it, and being in such close quarters with one of two men, the other who was just a friend… A textbook crush – no real meaning attached. That assured her enough; adding the reminder that she didn’t know who Oliver Bird was yet chilled her body down to room temperature.

The book still lay open in her lap. She closed it and pushed her thoughts of Oliver aside so she could sleep.

The next morning, she showered and washed her hair before blow drying it deliberately, sweeping it off to one side. She dressed in a skirt and blouse, buttoning a blazer over her. Melanie looked the part she would play today – professional. She believed it all to be going well until she opened her bedroom door and saw Oliver there, making her squeak in surprised.

He didn’t seem to notice, dressed and poised himself: a man with purpose.

“I’ve been thinking, too. Psychologists are usually evaluated themselves, are they not?” She agreed as such. “I think if I’m going to open up to you, you should open up to me, Doctor Boyle.”

She offered a slight smile. “I didn’t know you had any training… Ah—“ She paused, understanding his meaning.

He wanted to read her mind.

Trying to keep her composure, she declined. “I don’t want someone with unbridled control in my thoughts.”

To her disbelief, Oliver chortled. “Relax, Melanie. I’m not going to look at your romantic trysts or the last time you bought frilly panties.”

“That’s enough of that,” she said.

“To be fair, I don’t really know you either,” he argued. “And how are you going to work alongside someone whose powers you’ve never seen – or felt – at work?”

He leaned against the doorway expectantly, clearly knowing he won the argument. To his credit, Oliver didn’t wear a smug look upon his face, and Melanie didn’t give him the satisfaction of looking defeated.

“Okay,” she responded coolly and walked past him.
They pulled two chairs from the dining room table into her makeshift office. Oliver thought it would be good practice for her to use the space, and Melanie agreed, indulging him. Having learned many techniques of psychiatry, she relied on feeling out the patients’ disposition before a session and proceeding from there. In this case, Oliver hesitated when she brought up evaluating him. So, to keep him amiable, she let him control the situation.

Her own clipboard sat on her leg, her prized pen with her name engraved on it (a graduation gift from her stepfather) rested in her hand, and she watched him. Oliver sat with his hands in his lap, his shoulders against the chair, reclining, waiting. Melanie crossed one leg over another and began with a simple question:

“Tell me about your childhood.”

That simple question opened Oliver Bird to her completely.

Oliver Bird was born to David and Natalie Bird. His father built airplanes in New Zealand and innovated engine design to create a lighter, more fuel-efficient vessel. Rather than sell it to the highest bidder, he moved his wife and young daughter Catherine to the United States and founded his own airline. But their riches and the arrival of baby Oliver couldn’t smooth things over between the parents. David died of a heart attack when Oliver was barely one year old, much to the relief of Natalie and Catherine.

It was years before the young and only son understood why his father was so hated by the rest of his family, especially when they still benefitted greatly from his company’s revenue. Natalie never remarried for her children’s sake but remained happy to be alone. Oliver started developing his powers at age nine but couldn’t control them. He saw it through his mother’s eyes that David cheated on her and hit her. He never hit Catherine, but Oliver saw through her that she witnessed their father hit their mother.

“I could feel their pain and hatred. I never felt such pure hate before, and I hated him too then. I never idolized the man, nor did I ever begrudge my mother again for never remarrying after I felt her trust betrayed so deeply. I wanted a father, but not one like him.”

Melanie wrote her notes subtly, never taking his eyes off him even as he avoided eye contact with her.

He continued. His mother did all that she could to give him a world-class education. They had a giant library, they traveled using unlimited free flight vouchers with the airline, and he went to a private school in New York. At 18, Oliver received his hefty inheritance, but he knew better than to be foolish with money. He went to study in Paris in a school rumored to have a secret society of mutants. Catherine had moved there years ago influencing his decision further. He studied literature for his degree but spent free time learning physics, chemistry, and biology.

“Study what you love, do what you must,” he told Melanie – a mantra from his mother.

The rumor about his school was true. He met others like him, people who could move things with their mind – a power he started to hone there but still hadn’t mastered. They could spit acid and breathe fire, even control water. He tried to gather everyone together, to learn from each other to control their powers, but they were all so young. They didn’t have the resources or the know-how. Many were traumatized by their own powers betraying them.

A group of men found them, American men including the same man who attacked Cary and Kerry but led to the students by the Parisian police. They took the mutants who went willingly into custody and shot those that fought back. A few of his friends, Oliver suspected, got away but he never saw
them again. Powered by adrenaline, in true fight or flight mode, he somehow controlled all of their minds and made himself invisible to their eyes. He had never before managed controlling multiple minds at once, let alone reaching a mind without making physical contact with a person.

Unsure of how long he could sustain his control, Oliver snuck into the school’s admissions office and burned their student records to keep the identities of those who escaped, and his own, safe. He stayed with Catherine for a time until his mother died. Overcome with grief, he flew home to bury her and had to stay back to manage the family finances. He put time into researching who had ambushed them but couldn’t even find a whisper of a name until Jessica O’Toole’s case became highly publicized.

Melanie cleared her throat, interrupting for her own sake. “Yes, I know the case well.”

“I won’t bore you with the details, but I think you’ll be interested to know that I flew out to Texas to get answers, and I got a name.”

She leaned forward, literally on the edge of her seat.

Oliver hummed. “Oh, come now. I’m still weaving my story. I can’t jump ahead.”

Humored, Melanie apologized and asked him to continue.

Oliver watched the courthouse from a safe distance and saw that man with the curly mane again entering to watch the trial. Only from conversations with Jessica’s mother, stolen moments when Oliver accosted her on the street for answers, did he gather Walter’s name. Apparently Walter used a similar tactic, showing up unannounced to the O’Toole house to convince her mother that sending Jessica away would protect her.

Oliver didn’t believe that in the slightest, but in trying to talk to her mother and plead with her to defend her daughter in court, he got discovered by Walter and his government subsection. So he ran. They didn’t have his name at the time, but he figured it would only be so long before they discovered his identity.

“It was on the run that I heard the unfortunate news regarding Jessica’s guilty verdict and her imprisonment,” said Oliver solemnly.

Melanie’s hand stopped moving, her notes left abandoned. She looked away toward the window, remembering her thesis’ conclusion.

Perhaps with the proper surveillance and guidance, Ms. O’Toole could live a free life. But even if she were found not guilty, society would have shackled her to a life of self-hatred just as it always has to diversity.

“Cary showed me your thesis,” Oliver remarked with his uncanny ability to read her thoughts without seemingly reading them from her mind. “It was moving.”

She was at a loss for words. He looked lost too, unsure of what to say next, almost as if he sought to comfort her after revealing his own troubled life.

Finally, he spoke. “What else do you want to know?”

“I’ve heard enough.” Her voice sounded foreign to Melanie, distant and far away.

So they were targeting all mutants, not just Jessica. Cary wasn’t safe. Neither was Oliver.
She looked at him, finally seeing something other than an anomaly, something other than a puzzle needed to be solved.

“Come,” Oliver said, standing. “You can tell me your thoughts, that I’m deranged or what have you, somewhere else. We’ve cooped you up in this place for too long.”

The drive lasted maybe twenty minutes; Melanie watched out the window of Oliver’s car as they headed north on the interstate. They pulled over into an empty field lush with green grass and wild flowers. Cary’s foot wasn’t even out of the car before Kerry leaped free, giggling and promising to pick everyone flowers. Careful to not let her stray, Cary followed close behind, wincing every time her small fist unearthed the flower’s roots with the raw energy of her power.

While Melanie’s focus was on the Loudermilks, Oliver placed a blanket onto the grass. They sat upon it, and she pulled her poetry book from her bag.

“Are you enjoying it so far?” Oliver asked.

She opened the book to where she left off, her two leaves a bookmark to the page. “Yes, but why were you so intent on me reading it?”

“You’ll understand more once you’ve finished,” he teased.

“I overachieved, didn’t I? With the leaves, I mean.”

Melanie held them out to him, and Oliver took them into his hand, comparing them to the needles of the pine trees rooted in the distance. He handed the fresher leaf back and let the wind take the older leaf off into the field.

“There,” he started, watching the leaf until it faded from his view, “a leaf stays here and the other goes with you. A traveler leaves pieces of his heart in the places he loves but doesn’t consider it fragmented. No matter what you choose, Melanie, now a part of you will stay here, be it a leaf or your influence upon Cary and myself.”

Her heart raced. The wind picked up and blew tendrils of her hair across her face, as it did to him, the dark strands wisps across his nose. There were so many things Meanie could have said in that moment, but then her bag fell from where it rested upright against her, emptying onto the blanket. The metal clip of her clipboard flashed in the sun, reminding her of their session. She opened her mouth to speak at last.

“I think you’ve internalized what your father did, how he hurt your family, perhaps because you saw it firsthand through your mother’s eyes at such an early age. And,” she paused, seeing the bitterness on Oliver’s face, “that’s fine, because you strive to be better than he was. You treat the women in your life better – which is a relief, to be honest, because you come off as a womanizer.”

“I simply love women; it doesn’t mean I’m sexist.”

“No… it doesn’t. You are so smart, but I think you’ve been longing for acceptance and a place for yourself. Being the only one in your family with these powers ostracized you; the trauma of the ambush in Paris made you feel unease. You’re trying to build a home for people who don’t belong so that you can, at long last, feel a sense of belonging too.”

He didn’t meet her eyes at first, looking off toward Kerry in her little overalls chasing a butterfly and
Cary chasing her, shouting with glee. He watched them with soft eyes, Melanie noted, feeling warmth in her heart despite the cooling air. When Oliver Bird at last locked eyes with Melanie, she had a thought that would stick with her for years to come: she had never had a patient open himself so completely to her.

“Are you sure you’re not a telepath? You could have fooled me,” he told her in an attempt at humor.

She rolled her eyes, groaning. “It’s okay to just sit in silence sometimes,” she replied jokingly, and the sound of his musical laugh filled the open space while still feeling private between the two of them.

Sighing, she lay out on the blanket and looked up at the blue sky. With the sound of the birds chirping and pages turning (Oliver must have taken the book to read), Melanie closed her eyes for a moment.

Melanie, if you can hear me, it’s not safe there. You have to leave now.

Gasping, Melanie shot straight up and looked around feverishly. The coldness she felt deep in her bones, as if she were lying on cold metal, dissipated, and she saw Cary above her. That’s when she realized it was Cary’s voice speaking to her.

“What did you say?” She asked him.

“I said we should leave now before it gets too dark,” he answered, his hand on her shoulder.

She nodded, turning to Oliver to see if he noticed anything off, but he simply got up and helped her to stand gingerly. Kerry stepped between them then, offering them each a bouquet. Oliver’s was made of flowers all the different colors nature could offer.

“One for all of the characters in the stories you tell me,” Kerry said excitedly.

And Melanie’s was all sunflowers, golden yellow and warm in the sunlight. She asked Kerry what the sunflowers signified.

“Your hair, of course!”

Grinning, and sufficiently distracted from the voice in her dream, Melanie placed one of the flowers behind her ear.

“It suits you,” Oliver noted while folding up the blanket.

Back in the car, Melanie opened Leaves of Grass and read of urges that weren’t stifled, of bodies entwined, of innocence and debauchery. The wild and untamed nature and man. Oliver embodied. But why did he want her to read this? To have a better understanding of him? What more was there to understand, and how could it be found in a book over 100 years old? She looked up from the page to her obscured view of him from the backseat. His hands held the wheel, turning it with grace. Did Oliver really want her to see him as Walt Whitman, unashamed with lust and desire? Or as a man with a true understanding of nature?

Melanie recalled his story of Paris, of trying to control things with his mind and still honing that power. Could he grow stronger under the right circumstances? Was the key to unlocking his strength as simple as nature versus nurture?

At Summerland, serenity filled the air for the evening. Cary sat on the floor in the living room tinkering, and Oliver sautéed vegetables in a pan, the aroma enticing Melanie from curiously
meandering down her bedroom's hallway. The first room was Cary’s, she could tell from the open door, the next one hers, so that left the third, closed door to be discovered.

Oliver elegantly poured wine into the pan, the sizzling rising. Melanie beheld the sight as she walked over, indulging in observing her host. His smooth hum contrasted with the hiss and pops of his cooking, and he almost made a dance out of reaching for different spices. The humming stopped when he noticed his audience, and Melanie took the cue to step forward.

“I didn’t mean to stare, but I’m assuming you felt my presence the entire time regardless.”

“Ah, Melanie, my mind is thousands of places at once. You don’t need to fear that I’m hyper-aware of your every step.” Oliver looked at her through the curtain of his dark hair when he spoke, his focus divided equally.

“I’m not afraid,” she said, almost defiantly. His mouth turned up, but he didn’t speak. She continued: “Where was your mind, then?”

“Here, cooking this sauce, outside Summerland, ensuring that it’s safe as I cook this sauce, in Paris where I watched a world renowned chef make this sauce, and with my mother, who I think of often when I cook,” Oliver confided, his expression difficult to read.

Sighing at the beauty of it all, Melanie leaned against the counter. She was lulled into transparency, feeling compelled to tell him a truth that came up infrequently but more than once when around Cary and now in Oliver’s presence.

“It may sound ridiculous, but sometimes I wish—“

“Have you heard of the tale of the monkey’s paw?” He asked, interrupting with a smile that insisted he persist.

A man with a wife and son old enough to work came upon a mystical monkey’s paw, learning it could grant three wishes. The man wished for the money to pay his home’s final mortgage payment. Later that day, he learned that his son perished in the factory he worked in. The man received a settlement from the factory in the exact amount of the mortgage.

Overcome by grief, the wife begged her husband to wish for the return of their son. He did, and then they heard incessant knocking at their door. The man realized their son would return, but the paw wasn’t to be reckoned with, as their son would return to them as he last was – a corpse. His wife desperately tried to open the door for their child. Saving his wife from further despair, the man used his last wish, and when she opened the door, no one was there.

“You wish you had these or other powers, but fate isn’t meant to service human desire. Fate, rather, has granted you a clear mind. Your studies were pure and unhindered by the influence of bias – you were impartial to both the mutants in need and the people trying to stifle their voices. You are clear-headed and educated, earning you clout and legitimacy. That is your strength, Doctor Boyle. That is how you will help us in our endeavor.”

Oliver stepped toward her, their bodies closer than they had even been before. Melanie could see his features down to each minute detail – the angles of his face, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes, his sharp brow, and his full lips. He body was full, strong, in his well-fitting suit. The fancy cologne he wore made her nose tingle, enticed.

She stared at him as she leaned in close, his dark eyes trying so desperately not to blink, unsure of her movements. “You need me to help you, too, Oliver,” Melanie whispered.
Wordlessly, he nodded then broke away suddenly, reaching for the dried parsley to her right as Cary entered, waving one of his contraptions victoriously. Making herself busy, Melanie pushed off the counter and rummaged for plates. There would be time to help Oliver train later. He acknowledged as such when he glanced at her knowingly while asking for a large platter.

“Family-style dinner?” She questioned, Cary still rambling over them.

“Mi casa es su casa.”

Melanie busied herself for the next two days in brainstorming and planning Summerland, thankful to not have had inquiries about reading her mind for the time being. It stood as the last barrier between herself and Oliver, sacred as they became alarmingly close in what amounted to just a short, few days. It was easier to instead rework the bunk idea for the students (build them into the walls to avoid the boarding school or army camp vibes and make them feel safer, like wombs), and focus more on windows for natural light.

Oliver thought she was crazy when she offered using the technology projecting his voice in the coffee machine around the facility, like in the elevator or in announcing lock-down features. Cary took her side, assuring him that his voice was calming and reassuring, but they both regretted saying anything when Oliver started to show off and recite lock-down instructions in every language he knew throughout the day.

At night, she continued to read, until she finally found the lines Oliver recited by the lake. As I see my soul reflected in nature, As I see through a mist one with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty. Only, the poem didn’t end there. See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see, undulating into the willing and yielding day. It was all part of a larger poem about the female body giving life, attracting the author with its beauty.

Her face felt hot. Although it seemed highly unlikely that Oliver’s purpose was to convince Melanie to be more open-minded about sex, each poem made it more difficult for her to remove that from the equation. Could it all be a way to convince her to be more open-minded in general? To let him read her mind?

The next poem, in the theme of constant juxtaposition Whitman used between sexual nature and physical nature, spoke of sacred bodies, specifically that all bodies were sacred – that of the immigrants and the laborers. Melanie recalled an earlier poem denouncing slavery, a rampant issue during Whitman’s life with the Civil War just around the corner. Though her eyes scanned the page, Melanie’s thoughts were elsewhere.

While she expected Oliver’s aim was to seek out mutants for Summerland, she at last realized how he intended to do so, and it wouldn’t be safe.

Her mind raced; her pulse pounded against her dry throat. Clad in a nightgown, Melanie pulled a button-up blouse around her shoulders in an attempt at decency and warmth as she went to the kitchen for water. There, Oliver sat in his catatonic state. After downing two glasses of cool water, she approached him cautiously, waving a hand in front of him.

He didn’t blink, didn’t answer when she called out his name quietly. One of his hairs threatened to fall into his eye, and Melanie felt compelled to help him, to touch him. She stepped closer, reached out, and pushed the hair back, her fingers grazing his forehead.

That’s when she began to fall.
Melanie crashed into the lake with a large splash and swam to the surface, gasping for breath. The water felt warm, body temperature, and the sun shone despite her remembering it distinctly to be nighttime. Turning toward the shore, she spotted Oliver, arms out, palms flat, as if pushing the air in front of him. She used wide strokes and stepped onto land, still feeling dizzy, still feeling as if she were falling.

Drops of water slipped down her calves. The stones were warm under her feet. She could be convinced it were a dream were she wearing anything other than her nightgown and silly shirt, now soaking wet and clinging to her body. Her nipples were taut against the silk. Melanie knew she would never dream this nonsensical situation.

Pulling the shirt tight across her front, she walked over to Oliver. “There’s no way I’m dreaming this, right?”

“You’re in the astral plane with me,” he said, abandoning his efforts. “You must have touched me, and I pulled you in. No matter.”

Grabbing her hands, he closed his eyes and concentrated.

“No wait,” she said, pulling her hands back. “What were you doing here? Trying to part the lake?”

“Yes, exactly that. I come here to try and move things with my mind. But telekinesis is harder than it looks, especially here with the tide working against me,” he said, watching the lake, sizing it up.

Melanie crossed her arms in thought. “And you’ve moved things with your mind before?”

“Rarely, when overcome with emotion. I shattered a framed photo of my mother and father at her funeral. And I did it accidentally when throwing a tantrum as a child, hitting my sister in the head with her doll.”

“Why can’t you control it, I wonder…”

Oliver pushed air out through his teeth. “If I knew, I wouldn’t be standing here.” Off her glare he apologized. “It’s just so frustrating to know—“

“There’s your problem,” Melanie interrupted, turning his shoulders so that he faced the lake again. “You need to clear your mind.”

She instructed him to outstretch his hands again, close his eyes, and take deep breaths. “Forget the times you did it before. Forget the sound of the lake lapping against the shore. Let go of your frustrations and just relax, listening to the sound of my voice.”

He looked peaceful, his olive skin beautiful in the sunlight.

“What do you visualize when I say ‘push’?” She asked, watching his face.

“Letters,” he replied, “written out like text on a page.”

She smiled, endeared. “Good, focus on those letters.”

To his credit, he did, his brow furrowing in concentration.

“Oliver, it’s just you, me, and the water. Now… push.”

Nothing happened, the strain on Oliver’s face appearing to be for naught. Then, like snowflakes in summertime, letters began to form from thin air. P U S H, they read, two dimensional as if pulled
from the page of a book. They floated to the water, gathering to one spot, and separated the tide, tearing a small section of it in half. Rocks and sand lay beneath, revealed by his efforts.

“Oh my god,” she breathed, “you’re doing it.”

Opening his eyes, Oliver beheld his power. Sweat dripped freely down his face, as heavy as the water still dripping from her hair. She placed a hand on his forearm and advised him not to over exert himself. Nodding, he released his hold, the letters collapsing to the ground and into the water before disappearing.

Oliver pulled her into a hug, panting against her. She hugged him back uneasily; the sensation of falling never left her, and he steadied her in her arms.

“It feels like a hypnic jerk, but it won’t stop,” she explained.

Oliver held her hands. “I’m so sorry for not realizing sooner; I need to get you out.”

This time, with the sensation of falling came falling itself. Melanie crumpled like a flower on the dining room floor, hearing Oliver gasp as he jolted awake. Her eyes clenched shut, she tried to breathe against the feeling of the wind being knocked out of her. The chair scratched against the floor as Oliver scrambled to meet her side.

“Did you—“ Oliver started, and Cary was quick to answer.

“She leaned against you, one foot off the ground. After I got there, you two were frozen for nearly ten minutes. Can you open your eyes, Mel?” Cary asked, easing her head up.

She tried, seeing the blurry shapes of Oliver and Cary.

“Incredible,” Cary observed.

Agitated, she swatted at him. “What is it?! Can you save the discovery voice until I’m not incapacitated?”

“Your pupils are extremely dilated. I’m assuming your vision is impaired?”

“Her humor is in tact,” Oliver observed, avoiding the swat aimed toward him. “But we should get her to the lab. Can you walk, Melanie?”

Answering affirmatively, she let them help her to a standing position but relied on their guidance. Her legs felt like jelly, and she was thankful to sit on the table in the lab, even as Cary attached the cold cardiac monitor to her chest. Oliver sitting so closely beside her, Melanie took caution in glancing down discreetly, seeing that she still wore the nightgown but that it didn’t hang damp anymore. She was completely dry. Of course, the cool room made her nipples just as taut as when they were wet, so she pulled the shirt around herself. Oliver grabbed a lab coat hanging in the room and put it around her shoulders for warmth. It smelled of him.

The monitor, switched on, started beeping at a normal rate. The sound pierced her head, almost echoing itself as if she could hear a second monitor on a delay. She blinked, and the sensation went away.

“It was so real,” she said to Oliver, feeling the need to talk to get out of her own mind.

“In a way it is real, just in a separate existence. Mind, not body. You can feel anything in there because you mind is telling you to feel that way while your body rests. Your pain receptors are still
working, your central nervous system is active,” he explained.

Melanie nodded, understanding. “Does it affect other people’s eyesight, or just mine?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Oliver said to her surprise. “I’ve never brought anyone else to the astral plane before. It’s a space I’ve created in my mind; I was too afraid to test if it was safe for others in case I hurt them.”

She turned to the monitor, seeing movements, numbers, but couldn’t read them yet. “Eyesight aside, which is getting better, I’m fine. You didn’t hurt me,” she offered, smiling.

The energy around Oliver didn’t feel relieved but rather tense. “The mind is very fragile. I might have caused some damage there.”

“How will you know?”

Oliver placed his hand on hers. Her lips pressed together in a tight line. He would need to read her mind.

“I’m asking for your sake, Melanie, and my own peace of mind,” he pleaded.

The speaker their side of the lab crackled as Cary spoke into the microphone, “I, too, would really like some assurance.”

The cardiac monitor beeped faster as Melanie agreed. “Yes, go ahead…”

Oliver placed his hands on her temple, telling her to just breathe. His own breath tickled her face and pushed the lace trim on the top of her nightgown against her breasts. It was easy for Melanie to focus on the back and forth of the lace.

Warmth flooded her senses; she wasn’t alone in her thoughts anymore. Ah, so that’s what it felt like – a literal presence. At least she had certainty that he hadn’t been there before. Memories played in her head, cycling through like radio stations coming in and out of reception: their meeting, Cary’s first call, teaching at the University, her mother’s second wedding, her father teaching her how to drive, running track… Melanie could hear songs playing clear as day, songs she hadn’t heard in years. She saw the image of a crib, her tiny, chubby arms reaching up to her parents.

“What are you looking for?” Her voice boomed, though she was fairly certain she only thought the question.

Oliver’s voice was quiet, close, like whisper. “Any disturbances, like a jump or skip in a record.”

After a few more moments, Oliver released himself from her mind, his warmth dissipating. Melanie opened her eyes, her vision less blurry but not fully restored yet. Cary entered, pulling the sticky tabs of the monitor off of her skin.

“Any skips?” She asked.

Shaking his head, Oliver pulled his hands away. “No, you’re playing beautifully.” He looked to Cary.

“Your vitals are normal, but you should rest.”

Heeding Cary’s words, Melanie let Oliver guide her to her room. He settled her into bed and promised to return. Before she could argue, he was off. Though tempted to send him away when he
would reappear, Melanie thought it best she relinquish control in a situation she didn’t fully understand. Perhaps she’d never understand the astral plane and Oliver’s control of it, in it. How long could he stay in there at a time? Would his bodily needs wake him, or would they go ignored?

Wanting to take her mind off of the experience and still dizzy at the mere memory of the falling sensation, Melanie pulled *Leaves of Grass* from her nightstand. The words were illegible still, but she could run her fingers down the pages and over the leaf inside. It grounded her to reality. Oliver returned with a cup of tea, chamomile by the scent of it. She took a sip, enjoying the earthy sweetness of it from the honey he must have mixed in.

Rather than stand over her, Oliver took a seat beside her bed, settling in. “I want to monitor your sleep to make sure there’s no affect on your sleep cycle or any sleep walking.”

Melanie’s concern lied more with nightmares, that odd voice that followed her, but she remained quiet.

“I’m shocked,” he remarked sarcastically. “No arguing? Perhaps something *is* amiss.”

She grumbled into her cup. “Don’t get used to it; I’m sure I’ll have the energy to argue tomorrow.”

His gaze moved to the book in her lap, and she swallowed, remembering her revelation. “You know what I seek to do,” he said.

Ah yes. He read her mind.

Eyes heavy, she nodded. It became harder and harder to keep her eyes open with her vision so unfocused anyway.

“Don’t worry about that now,” he said, his low voice reassuring.

And so she didn’t. She rolled to her side, facing him. “Did you have to pick an author who writes so candidly about sex?”

Oliver chuckled; her chest tightened and released at the pure sound.

“I wanted you to completely know me, did I not?”

Feeling warm, at peace, and safe, Melanie let herself drift off.

“*Fais de beaux rêves.*”

When she stirred awake, Melanie found Oliver still in the chair, awake but looking drowsy as hell.

“How are you feeling?” He asked, his concern reminding her exactly how she felt: conflicted, because of her feelings for him.

“Well rested,” she answered instead.

“Can you see clearly?”

She almost guffawed. She couldn’t see clearly at all with this blinding her. “Yes, my vision has returned to normal.”
Finding the poetry book at her side, she opened it, intent on ensuring she could read the text. The leaf inside marked the poem Melanie favored, and she recited, “Whoever you are holding me now in hand, Without one thing all will be useless,” before stopping, remembering why she found this poem so pertinent.

It ended I give you fair warning before you attempt me further, I am not what you supposed, but far different. If Oliver remembered the poem in full, he would assume the poem conveyed her vision of him.

“See? All better,” she said, feigning ignorance. “You should rest, though. You can’t function without sleep.”

As he left the room, agreeing to nap, Melanie could almost see his face fall. Of course, with his mind, he could probably summon the entire collection of poems. If she let emotion guide her, Melanie could be at his room in an instant, explaining herself, confiding in him her feelings. If she let her sense guide her, though… She turned to the window and the vast forest beyond.

Melanie needed space from Summerland. She needed to think.

Her hair still damp from her shower, she approached Cary in his lab. He saw the bag in her hand and sighed. Melanie asked him to sit with her, so they sat in rolling chairs, surrounded by lab equipment – just like old days.

“I want to stay, Cary. It feels right, but I’m too driven by feelings right now. I need to think rationally. When I do, I’m reminded of my students, the school… If I just vanished mid-semester, people would start asking questions and snooping. We wouldn’t be safe. And my mother? If I leave that life behind, I want it to be because it’s the right choice. I can’t resent you or Oliver for it.”

Cary blinked behind his glasses and cleared his throat. “I understand, Mel. And I’m grateful that you came up here. You’ll tell all that to Oliver, right? He doesn’t expect people to stay here, but that doesn’t mean he’s fine when they leave.”

Of course she would tell Oliver, she assured Cary. And she thought she’d have time to work up the courage to. When they made their way to the kitchen, though, he stood there cooking and rambling about not being able to sleep. She thought he wouldn’t stop talking, until he saw her bag. His train of thought derailed.

“I’ve scared you away,” he uttered bleakly.

“No, you haven’t. We should talk outside.” Betrayed by her own shaky voice, she took quick strides to him and placed a hand on his shoulder reassuringly. “Let’s take some food with us, hm?”

Melanie delicately placed the blanket from his car onto the grass, looking at the Summerland grounds as he settled everything down. She mapped out in her mind more facilities, more living quarters for dozens of students. There was room for them to exercise and work on their abilities. Oliver sat, tearing her away from her musings. She joined him and held their bowls as he spooned out what he described to be a traditional Japanese breakfast – savory rice and grilled fish.

But he moved as if his mind were elsewhere, his eyes still avoiding hers. Melanie knew she had to speak first to tear him away from whatever dark place he was going to.

“You want to rescue these mutants, travel far and wide to mental institutions, special needs schools, jails—“
Oliver interrupted, “You don’t have to go with Cary and I. You’ll be safe here.”

“Of course I’d go with you two. But you saw my life, so sheltered compared to yours. I’ve never flown in an airplane or traveled outside the state.”

He saw past her point, promising to do whatever he could to keep her safe. “They’re off my scent now, and I can have documents forged to travel under aliases if we’re ever compromised.”

“You know that’s not the issue, Oliver. I want to follow you and start this endeavor, but I need time to discern the root behind my wants. And I owe it to my prior commitments to stick out the school year, even settle things with my mother before I can come back here, in case something happens.”

The prospect of simply disappearing, leaving her mother behind to never know her fate, frightened Melanie.

“Can you tell me honestly that you’re not afraid of my powers?” He asked, staring at her with desperate eyes. “I won’t blame you, only myself for trapping you in the godforsaken astral plane and letting you stay there for my own gain.”

If he only read her mind at that moment, it would all make sense to him, all of the evidence would be present and he could draw the right conclusion. Melanie took his hand, holding it. That hand wielded great power, but it didn’t bother her. She told him as such.

“I trust you,” she told him. “I didn’t think things would move so fast, but I suppose—“ All of her words felt inadequate.

Her hand shook in his; he squeezed it, his eyes darting between hers for understanding. Melanie could feel her heart pounding, could almost imagine the cardiac monitor beeping uncontrollably. She slipped her eyes shut, remembering that falling sensation again. Then, she felt something solid against her forehead. She peaked her eyes open and saw Oliver resting his head against hers, their lips so close together.

“I didn’t think I would develop feelings for you, Oliver. And I need to leave to make sure that I make the choice to be here for me. I believe you reciprocate those feelings, and it makes it really hard for me to think, let alone make rational decisions.”

Her blood felt cold with nervousness. Oliver looked into her eyes, glancing down to her lips briefly before meeting her gaze. “You believe?” He asked, teasing. “Aren’t you the psychologist?”

“I’ll kiss you if it means you stop telling your horrible jokes,” she threatened, and their lips met.

It was electric. Warmth flooded Melanie’s senses, as it did when he read her mind, her lips feeling extraordinarily sensitive. She tasted the full-bodied flavor of him, their salty breakfast on his lips, and leaned into his touch, his hands on her lower back pushing her against him. In a flash, she saw not only Oliver kissing her but herself kissing him. The hairs on her arms rising, she realized his powers connected them, explaining the incredible sensation and arousal growing so swiftly between them. Melanie pulled away before their spark ignited into something more right then and there.

Still catching her breath, she sighed, “May 17th is my last day of classes. I’ll come back then.”

“Can I call you? I’ll miss your sweet voice.” Oliver leaned in to kiss her neck, brushing her hair aside. “My sunflower, blooming beneath me, her sweet pollen a siren’s call.”

Tempted to let him continue, Melanie at last pushed him away and gave him the direct line to her apartment, “especially if you’re planning on testing your freestyle poetry, to save some poor soul the
Oliver kissed her wry smile, eventually releasing her to pack her car. He left to grab something, and Cary emerged in his stead, hugging Melanie goodbye.

“I’m going to go on a limb and say you saw that,” Melanie said, her cheeks red.

“I didn’t,” Cary assured her, “but Kerry—“

And in a flash, Kerry was before her, singing, “Mel and Oliver sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage, the comes—“

“All right, all right,” Melanie laughed, hugging Kerry too. “I’ll see you both soon.”

Oliver returned with an envelope. “If you need a deciding favor that’s less intrinsic, here is your contract. No need to sign it, of course, but if you’re curious it’s all there.”

Standing before him, Melanie forced herself to take the damned contract and be on her way, afraid she’d never leave if she gave herself the opportunity to second-guess herself. She took his hand and squeezed it. Though she couldn’t manage to bid him farewell, she could hear him inside her mind, his lips unmoving.

*Goodbye for now, my dearest Melanie.*

When Melanie would go to summer camp in her youth, where she ran track with her hair tied back in a ponytail so tight it almost hurt and enjoyed the freedom from her parents, she returned with sun-kissed skin and expectancy that her bedroom would somehow look different as if it spent an exciting summer of its own. When Melanie returned from Summerland, she had the same expectancy of her apartment, yet it remained as she left it. She eyed the phone, tempted to call anyone and relay the events of the last few days, but she couldn’t.

So she busied herself by returning *Leaves of Grass* to the library, somewhat thankful to put that fantasy behind them, for Melanie also feared that her feelings for Oliver were still driven by romanticism brought on by keeping close quarters and a silly poetry collection. If they were to work as a couple, they needed to ground themselves in reality – their personalities and actions – rather than the idea of themselves foraging in the forest.

Still, Melanie found it difficult to push the loaded words of Whitman like *undulated*, and *ebb and flow* after her and Oliver’s heated kiss. At long last, in need of a cold shower or the equivalent of one, she called her mother and planned to visit in three week’s time for her upcoming birthday dinner.

Dinner was awkward, as expected, with Melanie, her stepfather Richard, and Rachel all having little in common. After dessert over a glass of brandy, Melanie handed Richard, a business lawyer, her contract for review, having not looked at it herself. Rachel dismissed the financial talk, having a more serious matter to discuss.

“Tell me what’s new in your life. You clearly have something exciting going on; you’re positively glowing,” Rachel drawled.

“Well,” Melanie began, “remember that work trip? I met a man.”

Her mother’s face dropped. “Not that nice professor?”
Groaning, Melanie put her glass down with force.

“Please, for the love of all that is holy, stop bringing up Allen. He proposed after a month and expected me to quit to raise his children. Why would I want to do that?”

“Oh, you’re making a mistake! He has money, and trust me dear, you’ll probably end up doing that no matter whom you marry,” Rachel warned, sipping from her stiff drink.

“Making a mistake?” Melanie challenged. “I’m making something of myself, making a difference in the world! I can’t do that by sitting at home, being a mom.”

Richard, making the wise choice, remained silent throughout the argument.

Rachel crossed her arms defiantly. “You’ll make a difference for your baby that way. I enjoyed being a mom; am I less of a person?”

“No,” Melanie sighed, “your opinion is valid. You and I want different things the same way Allen and I wanted different things. I think I’ll be happier with Oliver in the long run, regardless of how we handle parenting if it gets that far.”

No one spoke for a moment, the sound of the rattling ceiling fan seemingly thunderous without the mother and daughter yelling.

Finally, Rachel said, “You need to know that you’ll be happy.”

“How will I know?” Melanie questioned, for once encouraging her mother’s advice.

“You just will,” was all she said, spinning the ice around in her glass.

Two weeks later, Melanie prepared her final exams at the desk in her apartment. In the top drawer, back in its envelope, sat her contract – what Richard called a “dozy.” The contract promised to sever her ties with the University and additionally pay her a five-figure income yearly. The exact dollar amount made her laugh nervously, so she tried to avoid looking at the envelope.

Oliver called while she worked on the essay section, his call thankfully anticipated. When she first returned to Redding, he called nightly, but Melanie put an end to that quickly, announcing that they needed boundaries so she could actually concentrate on work. Oliver was amiable enough, finding loopholes in her dictation by occasionally sending sunflowers or chocolates.

This was the first time he called since she looked over the contract, and she wasted no time in arguing that it was simply too much money.

“I don’t understand the problem,” Oliver debated. “It’s a fair amount for someone of your stature. You’re highly educated and should be paid as such, or are we not keeping it professional?” He teased playfully.

Thankful that he couldn’t see her blushing, Melanie huffed. “Of course we’re keeping it professional, but when you factor in the money going straight to the school, you’re looking at over double the income figure, and as a business partner, I can’t let you throw money away. I’m sure Cary isn’t accepting a salary, whether or not you flirt with him the same way.”

It took Oliver a moment to collect himself, not at all helped by his own impressions of a flirting Cary. “How does the University pay you, if at all?” He asked once her could form words again.
“In housing and per diem, which is how I’d like to be paid by Summerland,” Melanie demanded in her best no-nonsense voice.

“Oh, *per diem. Exegi monumentum aere perennius,*” Oliver recited in Latin before translating: “I’ve made a monument more lasting than gold in Summerland, I believe, if you truly return for good. The three of us can change everything and unite mutant-kind, train them, and offer them health and happiness. Isn’t it thrilling?”

And that’s when Melanie knew that she would be happy with Oliver. Because even if Summerland wasn’t all that he dreamed, even if the three of them didn’t reach the high goals he set, his unadulterated enthusiasm showed the purity of his heart. A heart she hoped to share.

The same night, in the deepest of slumbers, Melanie felt Oliver with her, his warm presence surrounding her.

“I can feel you too,” he said, startling her, but she couldn’t see him. “I’m here in… spirit,” he offered as if still finding the lay of the land.

She dreamt she was floating on the lake, the sun warm but unobtrusive. His warmth flowed through her body from her head down to her…

Oh.

Arousal began to course through her, but she felt it as if second-hand. She glided a hand down to her breast, feeling her nipple through the nightgown she wore. The sensation made her moan, Oliver echoing the noise in her ear. They were connected mentally, just not in the astral plane - a plane of their own.

Sighing in pleasure, Melanie traced her hand down her leg, pulling the gown up to the curve of her hip and pushing her panties aside. When she touched herself, the same electricity of their kiss sparked again.

“Oliver,” she moaned, the water lapping around her.

He could barely say her name through his labored breaths. “I want to feel you against me, my sunflower,” he groaned in a whisper that flooded her mind. “I want you with me, crying out my name as we make love.”

“I know,” she said, her voice desperate with need, “and in just a short time I’ll be beside you, against you, around you…”

The orgasm rippled through Melanie’s body as if it could tear her apart, both of them peaking together, their pleasure united. Once the waves of sensation finally died out, she floated among the actual waves, satiated if a bit lonely until she heard Oliver’s deep voice again.

“I sing the body electric, *The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them. They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them, And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.*”

Sometime afterward, their dream connection severed, but Melanie didn’t feel alone in sleep.
The following morning, a messenger dropped off a note in Oliver’s scrawl.

*I’m sorry, though minimally so, for reaching out to you in sleep. I would dream a thousand dreams if they would bring you closer to me. Tes yeux, j’en rêve jour et nuit. J’ai besoin de toi. My sweet Melanie.*

Her ability to comprehend or speak French limited to foux du fafa gibberish noises, Melanie brought the note to a young female French professor. She translated, “I dream about your eyes day and night. I need you.” Melanie coughed to cover up her embarrassment.

The professor waved her hand in disregard. “French is the language of love; I’ve read worse. You’re welcome to sit in on my classes if you’d like you write anything in return. You might want to consider it – he writes like a good lover.”

“I, um,” Melanie stuttered, “I wouldn’t know.”

“If you ask me, you’ll find out soon if this letter is any, how do you say, *indication.*”

The days leading up to the 17th felt like centuries. Melanie unabashedly packed her apartment, ready to leap into the exciting new chapter of her life. She planned to drive up to Summerland after posting her final grades, her car loaded with clothing and essentials, and then arrange with Oliver how to discreetly move the rest, like her comprehensive library of psychology books.

Legs striding purposely to the grade board, Melanie beamed with elation. She pressed thumbtacks through her sheet of paper, each of the four tacks sealing her fate. A figure joined her side, noisily shuffling through the tacks to post his grade sheet as well.

“Allen,” Melanie greeted coolly, “I hope you have a great summer.” Though tempted to also wish him a great rest of his life in the most *go fuck yourself* way possible, remembering the way he completely ignored and disregarded her since their breakup months ago, she had to take the higher ground.

Allen hummed, looking her over and making her feel self-conscious in her summer dress. “You look good.” His tone wasn’t sarcastic as he looked her over; perhaps they could leave on a somewhat decent note.

Melanie almost thanked him, but he cut in.

“Ah, I know what it is! You look like you’ve finally removed that stick from your ass.”

Speechless, she struggled for words. Many vile ones entered her mind, but none weighed as strongly as she felt.

“And here I thought the most educated among us would know how to speak to a lady,” an accented voice boomed from behind her.

Oliver looked the part of a man on a mission – that mission being to punch Allen in the face. She stood in between the two men, though, telling Oliver that this wasn’t worth causing a scene over. Never once turning back to her ex, Melanie led Oliver out of the building and into an alcove.

“Melanie, we—“

She pushed him against a tree, kissing him passionately. Her hands gripped his back, her body and mind screaming at her that this was right; this was the future she wanted. Oliver returned the kiss,
pulling her against him, primal. Melanie finally broke away but held onto the lapels of his suit tightly in her fists.

“I’ve decided, Oliver. I want to be in Summerland. I can’t waste another moment here when there’s so much we can achieve.” Blinking away the stardust, she stepped back. “But I don’t think that’s why you’re here.”

Oliver shook his head remorsefully and took her hand. “Not entirely, no. I came here to make sure you were certain, but sadly we don’t have time to celebrate, my dear, if we want to make it in time.”

“In time for what?”

“In time to save someone before there’s another Jessica O’Toole incident.”

Rushing to his car, Oliver elaborated. In Oregon, a teenaged boy named Steven Brown electrocuted a fellow orphan in their foster home. Social Services were baffled according to the radio story Oliver heard, as there were no plugs or wires outside where the incident occurred. But the foster parents claimed that since taking Steven in, their house encountered many electrical oddities and thought he was a mutant. His school backed them up as well, citing anomalies surrounding the boy.

“They’re an hour away by flight. I’ve confirmed that the other orphan is still alive and they’re still in the hospital, but we need to hurry. The nurse I spoke to detailed only minor injuries on Steven, so it won’t be long until he’s taken into custody,” Oliver said as they drove to her apartment.

It took Melanie moments to pack a bag, stuffing in clothing for a few days, money, and her ID. When she went to grab her cardholder, Oliver stood in the way, staring at her.

“You’re really doing this.” He sounded astonished.

“I’m really doing this.”

“And you’re certain?”

Slightly agitated, Melanie approached him until they stood eye to eye. “Oliver, there’s a child hurt, another in danger of being incarcerated. Like you said, we’ll celebrate later. Now let’s go.”

He closed the space between them and kissed her for good measure, the moment intimate.

Cary, who met them at the airport, could sense that intimacy.

“I take it you’re in for the long haul, then?” He asked Melanie, and she squeezed his arm in response.

Being the son of an airline’s founder had its perks, Melanie observed. Oliver was greeted by name, and the three of them walked right past security without a second glance. A gate clerk handed Oliver their plane tickets without him even have to ask, and a steward took their bags straight from there.

Once seated together in a row, Melanie in the middle, Oliver debriefed them, interrupting only to refuse the copious offers of alcohol from the flight attendants, indicating the typical brand of luxury he traveled in.

Without their interference, he warned, Steven would go to juvenile hall and be forgotten, a child of the system. They would need to cause a distraction to break him free.

“We’re supposed to just waltz in there?” She asked, incredulous. Cary seemed to share her sentiment, tilting his head.
“It all depends,” Oliver said, “did anyone take drama class?”

He doled out their roles, his being the most important – removing the memory of Steven Brown from the minds of everyone in the hospital who knew or interacted with him. Without existing, Oliver insisted, Steven would be safe.

Conversation over, Melanie took the opportunity to watch Oliver as he leaned back into his seat. His eyes were closed in quiet meditation, but his fingers tapped incessantly against the armrests.

She placed a hand over his, smoothing over his knuckles. “You can do that? You can make them all forget?”

Oliver’s mouth tightened. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye briefly before resuming his tranquil state.

“I hope so.”

Once safely landed, they loaded into a rental car that Oliver procured in advance and drove to a motel. Cary and Oliver divvied up rooms – Cary would take a room with Steven that shared a door with a room for Oliver and Melanie. There would be no time for sleeping, as Oliver secured return flights for four hours from then. The motel was merely a safe house; its manager, used to less savory clientele, would think little of guests renting the rooms for only hours at a time.

Cary took the opportunity to walk to the drug store down the street and purchase a first aid kit, while Melanie used the restroom to change into a professional outfit. With their imminent hurry, she opted for slacks instead of a skirt and a shorter heel. When she emerged, she saw Oliver laying on the bed and thought he was in the astral plane, preparing for the strenuous mental task ahead.

“Hm, what a shame,” he said, startling her.

“What is?”

“When I imagined sharing a hotel with you, it was in the cobbled streets of Bruges after a candlelit dinner.” Oliver looked wistful, his dark eyes watching her straighten her blazer in the mirror. “Am I disappointing you with this reunion?”

Melanie didn’t turn but caught eye contact with him through the mirror’s reflection. She smiled earnestly, imagining what would be of her life of travel and heroics. “Not in the slightest.”

Though he said nothing in return, Melanie knew Oliver shared the same sentiment.

Having lived a sheltered life in a quiet town, Melanie only saw the aftermath of bank robberies and heists in dark movie theaters. So in her mind, she pictured police cars would be parked haphazardly in front of the hospital with officers in front of the entrance, their hands poised over their holsters.

She sighed nervously at the reality as they drove around to the back parking lot – no cars or officers out front and just one police car in the back lot. Cary and Kerry exited the backseat of their rental car and went ahead to scout the children’s ward. Melanie anxiously exhaled once she and Oliver were alone.

“Pull your hair down,” he told her.

Her hair was tied up into the tight ponytail of her track and field days to help her focus, but she did as
instructed, wincing as the hair tie pulled some hairs from her scalp. She ran her fingers through the blonde tendrils until they all fell into place.

Oliver nodded, satisfied. “You don’t want too many people to recognize your face,” he explained.

Not trusting her voice, she moved to open the car door, but he took her hand. Oliver’s thumb traced calming circles on it.

“We need to go,” she argued.

That’s when the distant-sounding voice from when she first arrived at Summerland rang through her head again:

*Leave, Melanie. Get out now.*

Though still muffled, it sounded like Oliver’s voice but stern. She watched him; he gave no inclination of having said anything in her head, and when he had spoken to her telepathically in the past, it was always so clear.

Why did she keep hearing that warning?

She blinked, and the nervous heat that coursed through her ran cold for a moment. Melanie shook her head, clenching her fists, and the disturbance was gone. She felt normal again.

“We need to go,” she repeated as if nothing had happened. Oliver appeared nonplussed as well.

As quickly as the moment came, it was gone.

They walked purposefully through the hospital. Oliver reached Cary’s mind and found the way, relaying what he could see through his friend: two police officers stationed outside Steven’s room, the ward otherwise not overly busy. Melanie watched the people as she passed through various off-white painted hallways. No one seemed particularly interested in her or Oliver. Why would they be? They wouldn’t see this coming.

In the children’s ward, Cary and Kerry sat in a small book section. Cary caught Oliver and Melanie’s eye as they walked in, seeming nervous behind his glasses. Melanie saw Kerry squeeze his hand reassuringly, always the brave one between the two, and waited for Oliver’s signal.

Oliver held a fist to his mouth and coughed.

Kerry started to scream. She stood from her small chair and kicked it across the room, throwing a tantrum of epic proportions. Nurses and doctors rushed to her, scared she might be in pain or having an adverse reaction to a medication.

While Cary pretended to console her, Oliver led Melanie to the left where two distracted police officers stood outside of a hospital room.

“We’re the child psychologists sent here from Social Services to interview the boy,” she told them, surprising herself with her steady voice.

The officers looked between themselves, then back towards the screaming child behind Melanie and Oliver.

“That freak hasn’t said a damn thing,” said one of the officers.

“That’s why we’re here,” Oliver noted, trying to keep the strain from his voice at the insult toward
mutants.

Reaching into her bag, Melanie grabbed her card holder and pulled out her University business card, naming her Dr. Melanie Boyle, PsyD., and handed it to the officers. They shrugged and let them through the door.

Inside the room, Melanie saw Steven Brown handcuffed to the hospital bed and looking miserable but not surprised by their presence – many strangers must have walked through the door during his short time in the hospital. Two women held a conversation in the corner of the room. One, presumably the foster mother, didn’t want to lose the other children in her care and argued as such with the other, presumably a Social Services representative. But Melanie kept her gaze on Steven and his bandaged hands.

Oliver’s hand on her back removed her from her thoughts, just in time for the two women to approach. Melanie repeated her lie to them to little avail.

“No one told me to expect psychologists,” the representative said skeptically.

Melanie opened her mouth to argue, but Oliver stepped in instead. “Oh, that’s odd, isn’t it?” His tone remained calm, playful even. “I have this memorandum right here, if you’d both like to see.”

As the two women looked over his shoulder to a folded up piece of paper he pulled from his pocket, his eyes slipped shut. Oliver ditched the paper and snuck a hand on each of their heads. Though responsible for keeping in eye on the door, Melanie snuck a glance to the image of the women slumping into two chairs near the bed, unconscious. Oliver straightened his shirt, exhaling with exertion.

Steven wiggled in his bed, trying to free himself.

“Shh shh, it’s okay,” Melanie cooed, “we’re here to help you, not to hurt you. We’re going to keep you safe, but you need to play along, okay?”

He didn’t nod but stopped struggling, and Melanie took that as her cue to call for the police officers while Oliver stood in the corner by the doorstopper out of view. They rushed in, and Melanie closed the door behind them.

“What happened?” They asked frantically, looking to the two slumped over figures and back to the boy, their hands reaching toward their belts.

Oliver rushed up and clutched the back of their heads, his eyes clenched shut in concentration.

“Melanie!” His voice was strained as he wiped their minds clean of memory of the boy. “Grab the keys and uncuff him!”

She fumbled with the key ring at one of the officer’s belts before freeing it and releasing Steven from his restraint. She returned the cuffs and keys to their rightful place with a shaking hand, announcing as such to Oliver.

When he released them, the policemen stood up straight and looked around the room in confusion.

“What happened?” One asked the other, but neither had a clue.

Oliver shrugged. “We were just here, visiting our nephew. Some of the family fell asleep, right dear?”
“Yes,” Melanie agreed amicably, “and you must be doing your rounds.”

The officers looked to each other and nodded, excusing themselves and wishing Steven well.

A plethora of emotions flashed across Steven’s face – incredulous, confused, frightened, but ultimately, relieved.

Oliver moved to sit on Steven’s bed, and explained. “You have… You can do things, am I right? Things that not everyone can do?”

Steven nodded.

“That’s how you hurt that girl?” Oliver questioned.

Looking away, Steven nodded again.

“I can do things too, Steven. I can read minds and tell them what to see and what to think. I’m making these people forget that they ever knew you so that you can be safe.”

Seeing that Steven didn’t move at Oliver’s words, Melanie took a seat beside Oliver, touching the boy’s arms.

“Did you mean to hurt her?” She asked.

Steven quickly looked at her and shook his head, angered at the suggestion.

Finding her angle, Melanie continued. “People out there are going to blame you, say you meant to do it, that you’re dangerous and should be locked up. But that’s not right. We want to protect you, and give you a place where you can feel safe. Give you a home. Do you want to come with us?”

She felt Oliver’s presence in her mind, quietly questioning her. You’re asking if he wants to come with us? Where else is he going to go? Melanie had to fight against closing her eyes against the sensation, not wanting to scare Steven further.

All while holding Steven’s eye contact, she reminded Oliver that the child was terrified. He had been shoved around his entire life, forced to move from foster home to foster home without having a say in the matter. Steven had to make the decision for himself or they wouldn’t be doing him a better justice.

Finally, Steven nodded his head and sat up. Oliver squeezed Melanie’s hand and thanked her mentally. My sunflower…

Oliver freed Steven from the machinery, and Melanie, like the siren Oliver compared her to before she left Summerland, was tasked with beckoning in the doctor. Oliver wiped his mind and sent him on his way, having gathered from his thoughts that Steven was only in the hospital during the span of one rotation of doctors and nurses.

Melanie used that information when she went to the nurses’ station, asking who tended to Steven. Two nurses stepped forward, and Melanie thanked them for their help before stepping back into Steven’s room.

“It was those two,” she pointed out to Oliver, who looked disheveled and worse for wear. “Are you okay?”

“Just a little drained,” he said dismissively before leaving the room to avoid her scrutiny.
Having to distract herself from worrying about Oliver, she helped Steven dress into his ratty clothes and asked if he had an ID. He pointed to a wallet that sat on a table. Melanie opened it, pulling out the card and throwing it to the bottom of her bag. Behind the ID, stuck to the leather and needing to be pried free, was an old photo of a young woman: likely Steven’s mother. Melanie snuck it back in, embarrassed for snooping and handed him the wallet, reassuring that they’d be leaving very soon.

She led Steven outside, standing by the door as Oliver leaned against the nurses’ station, flirting with the two women.

“Do either of you know the story of the albatross?”

They shook their heads in coy interest.

“Close your eyes and picture it for yourselves,” he instructed in a silky tone.

The nurses slipped their eyes shut, and Oliver stole the opportunity to touch their temples, all while telling the tale of an albatross that followed a captain’s ship. Thinking it to be a bad omen, the captain shot the bird.

“Ah, but the albatross was a sign of good luck, and the crew suffered because the mariner had just cursed them all. He wore the albatross around his neck as his penance.”

Oliver removed his hand, and the nurses opened their eyes.

“That’s so sad,” the younger nurse said, pouting her lip. “What made you think of that story?”

Stealing a glance to Melanie and Steven, he started on his way. “It reminded me of my nephew. Guilt is often a burden worn visibly and can’t easily be forgotten.”

Cary and Kerry were gone; Melanie hoped they were waiting at the car, per the plan. Oliver didn’t mention them, making Melanie believe he was too tired to search for them telepathically. She wanted to leave as soon as possible, but they had to walk without drawing attention to themselves.

They almost cleared the ward when Steven stopped in his tracks to look inside a room to a girl. She was unconscious and heavily bandaged, the white cotton leaking with blood and fluid, indicating burns. The girl was alone, and Melanie feared that she would be forgotten as well and shared her worry frantically to Oliver.

“Her foster mother will wake up soon and see to her; they’ll both think it was an accident with the fryers at the burger stand she works at after school,” he elaborated before slipping into the room.

Oliver did his work on the young girl. It appeared easier for him to Melanie, perhaps because the girl was asleep, but she thought it incredible regardless that he could create a whole narrative in people’s lives that they believed but didn’t live. When he came back, he tilted his head toward the exit, and she and Steven followed, the latter taking one last look of remorse toward the girl’s room.

Their car was out front, Cary at the wheel. Oliver slipped into the front seat while Melanie and Steven took the back.

“Are you and Kerry okay?” Melanie asked, not seeing the girl.

“We’re safe, though we really just fed into her mischievous side,” Cary joked.

Cary introduced himself to Steven, who remained silent. Oliver joined in that silence, his head resting against the window. When they arrived at the motel, Cary removed Steven’s bandages to examine
the 2nd degree burns before applying a fresh bandage. He questioned the boy’s powers in a fruitless effort. Melanie believed Steven was in shock still or perhaps so used to not being heard that he found speaking pointless.

She pulled his ID from her bag and turned it around in her hand while Oliver took a 20 minute nap to rejuvenate. Looking out the window, she waited for him to wake up, and for what else? The cops to arrive? Her mother to call and yell at her? Neither happened, but one more obstacle stood in their way:

The flight home.

Oliver stirred awake and looked less like he was one foot into the grave but still exhausted. Melanie leaned over him and brushed his hair out of his face.

“Hey, how are you feeling?”

Oliver pulled her close for a lazy kiss and sighed against her lips. “I’ll make it.”

“I took Steven’s ID,” she said, settling next to him in bed, relieved to be off her feet. “I don’t know if he should be using it.”

He told her not to worry and got up to gather his things. “But we need to head out if we want to make that flight.”

Cary checked out for them and drove the rental car back to the drop-off near the airport. They took a courtesy shuttle the rest of the way and finally made it to the proper terminal. Oliver handed the airline clerk his ID before the other three’s.

“We’re flying under the radar today for some private business,” he explained. “First initial, last name on the tickets will do.”

Without any argument, the clerk printed the tickets as directed and took their bags. There was no downtime in the airport; they cut it close enough to be seated and offered blankets and pillows before the gate closed and the plane trailed the tarmac. None of the four slept, all too shocked and elated that they made it out of Oregon. Melanie declined alcohol from the stewardess but gladly accepted a bottle of water, parched beyond belief. Steven drank one at her insistence, sipping from a straw she obtained for him.

When she turned to Oliver, she saw him watching her. “You’re good at caring for people,” he said softly.

“I’m going to have to care for you too. You look like hell,” she answered.

They all did, but having played the smallest physical role in the whole operation, Melanie took it upon herself to get them all home. Upon landing, she loaded everybody into Oliver’s car and drove them home, running on adrenaline alone. She cracked a window open to keep her awake, the cool air blowing against her face. It was hard to believe that the entire span of her consciousness stretched over 24 hours and back to the University.

“What a god damn day,” she muttered to herself, everyone else in the car fast asleep.

The car at last safely in the Summerland driveway, she led Steven to the dormitory, thankful that Oliver kept sheets and pillows on the bunks. Steven kicked off his shoes and climbed into the bed, surprised to be alone.
“You’re our first student,” Melanie said, looking at the empty bunks and their potential. “And you’re safe here. We’re going to take care of you.”

She walked away but saw him staring at the bunk above him, his eyes still open.

“You’re not to blame, Steven.”

Not sure if her words had any effect, she eventually turned off the light and left. Cary and Oliver stood in the living room, but she shook her head.

“There’s nothing that can’t be gone over tomorrow.”

Cary agreed, heading out first after wishing them a goodnight. Oliver waited for her to walk beside him, his steps weary. Melanie’s lip quivered at the sight, feeling the control of her emotions start to slip. She swallowed and led him to his room. He opened the door and gestured for her to come in.

Bookshelves lined the walls with titles ranging from Shakespeare to physics texts. His record collection was immense as well and tempting to get lost in, but she restrained herself and ordered him to get ready for bed. Oliver peeled off his jacket and shirt while she stood there, trying not to watch. He looked down toward his legs.

“You’re free to assist with the—“

“No,” she said sternly, walking toward the door.

“I still owe you a proper date,” he called after her.

She turned her head over her shoulder. He sat down on the bed bare-chested, his hands resting on the comforter. “I’ll have to hold you to it,” she told him before closing the door behind her.

Safely in the hallway, Melanie kicked off her pinching shoes and carried them into her room. She undressed and washed her face, careful not to look at her reflection. After crawling into bed, she at last allowed herself to cry tears of relief, but covered her mouth to avoid being heard.

They did it.

Over the next two weeks, Cary, Oliver, and Melanie adjusted to finally having a student in Summerland. Oliver and Cary alternated educating Steven in science and the arts while his hands still healed, though their progress remained limited while he refused to speak. Melanie held sessions with Steven, opting to tell him a story or explain a psychological theory he might have been experiencing when he didn’t answer one of her questions.

She asked Oliver not to read his mind until she made a breakthrough, as the events that sent him to the hospital were his story to tell. On his best behavior, Oliver agreed and watched over Steven while she and Cary drove down to pick up her car and clothing from her apartment. With the school almost entirely empty during the summer season, it was safe for Cary to walk the grounds without fearing recognition. It felt like old times – the two of them wandering the campus deep in conversation.

Before they drove back, Melanie leaned against her car door and Cary against Oliver’s when she broached a subject that bothered her.

“I don’t want to get in the way of your relationship with Oliver.”
Cary laughed. “Shouldn’t I be saying that to you?”

“Oh, don’t play dumb,” Melanie chastised. “You two built that place by hand. You guys barely left Summerland in the eight years you’ve been gone because it became your mission. I’m just saying that I value the friendship you have with him as well as our relationship.”

Cary shrugged, at odds with what to say. Melanie couldn’t recall him having many friends while in school, probably having ostracized himself because of his mutation. He likely had never experienced losing a friendship to a romantic interest.

“I appreciate that, Mel. With your work ethic, though, I doubt it’ll be much of a problem. And I enjoy having you up there, if only to outnumber Oliver when we have to make commonsense votes.”

That out of the way, they drove up, Kerry joining Cary, sitting in the backseat with the window rolled down so that the wind blew her hair around. Melanie followed behind, the radio providing her company.

Upon their return, Oliver insisted that they have a drink together and poured them all a couple of fingers of scotch each, believing that they deserved the night to unwind. It took one sip and approximately 30 seconds for Cary to ignore Oliver’s intentions and delve into his theories about Steven’s powers. He thought that if Steven could generate electricity, he shouldn’t have burns on his hands. Perhaps, driven by anger or another emotion, he generated more than he could bodily handle?

“This is Cary’s way of unwinding,” Melanie joked, amused by the oddity of the three of them.

Oliver drank deeply, the ice in his glass clinking. “I tried.”

“Speaking of trying,” Melanie started, “I think we need to try and find other teachers here. We can’t handle every aspect of this operation alone, and now that things are going reasonably well with Steven—“

“The boy’s not talking yet,” Oliver argued.

“He will with time. As I was saying, now we should be focused on finding more mutants, so we need stagnant professors who hang back in Summerland and just teach, be it educational studies or working with their powers.”

Having stepped off her metaphorical soapbox, she felt more at ease to indulge in her scotch. Oliver tilted his head in inclination and held his glass up to her.

“I think you’re right, my dear. I’ll peruse my contacts and see who’s interested,” he responded.

Cary slammed his hands on the table, his nearly untouched drink threatening to slosh out of the glass. “What if Steven touched the currents after he released them?”

“Assuming he either can’t or hasn’t controlled his ability to sustain them?” Oliver asked.

But Melanie was already on her feet, heading toward the dormitory. Steven turned to her when she entered, clearly still not sleeping well.

“I know what you did,” she said. “I know you didn’t mean to hurt her. You wanted to protect her, didn’t you?”

He shook; upon closer inspection, Melanie could see him crying. She pulled him into a hug, spotting Oliver and Cary watching in the doorway from over Steven’s shoulder.
“I couldn’t even do that right,” Steven sobbed into her shoulder.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” She pried, gently.

To her surprise, Steven recounted through broken sobs stomping out to the foster home’s backyard, furious that they were planning on moving him to a new home after he fought with a boy in school. The boy mocked Steven for not having a mom and dad, saying they abandoned him when they discovered his powers. Melanie recounted the photo of his mother in his wallet and wondered about her fate but didn’t interrupt him.

He was so angry that he could feel his powers betraying him. Though he didn’t want to, it felt good to release them. He was alone, until Mandy came outside to comfort him. He saw the jolt hit a puddle, so he dropped his hands in the water to absorb the shock before she could step in. She had never seen him use his powers and thought he was hurt, so she touched him, electrocuting herself.

“Do you know if she…” His sad voice trailed off, not wanting to ask the difficult question.

“Mandy is scarred, but she will live,” Oliver said, stepping in.

Steven hiccupped. “And she won’t remember me?” After seeing Oliver’s nod, he continued. “Good. Then she can be happy and won’t be afraid of a monster like me.”

“That’s enough of that nonsense,” Melanie said shortly. “You’re not a monster, the same way Cary and Oliver aren’t monsters. You just need to learn to control your powers. We’re going to help you do that, so you don’t hurt anyone again. All right?”

Oliver stood beside her, and Cary beside him, a reassuring presence for the boy. Steven agreed, relieved to have a weight removed from his shoulders, and was left alone to sleep.

They all drank in silence after that, feeling their effect on the child sinking in. When they retired to their rooms, Cary walked behind Melanie and Oliver not noticing their fingers entwined, oblivious to the mood he was silently killing.

“My god, man,” Oliver groaned. “Go to bed so I can kiss my girlfriend.”

Melanie’s body flushed with embarrassment, and she hid her face behind a hand. “Oliver!”

Just then, Kerry ran out and made a disgusted face.

“Kissing’s gross,” she said.

“I agree,” said Cary, though he smiled at them from behind her back.

Oliver, more likely drunk on life than scotch, lifted a hand in graceful argument. “Kissing is one of the most beautiful thing two people can do. The nerves on human lips are so sensitive that when they touch, it feels like a spark. Kissing is how you both exist. Well, kissing and some other—”

“Aaand goodnight you two,” Oliver cut in, pushing Kerry into their room before she heard any more.

That just left Melanie and Oliver in the tight hallway. She leaned against her door, Oliver towering over her. He bent down to kiss her, but she turned her face, only giving him her cheek.

“‘Girlfriend’? She asked.

“Are you not?” He countered.
Their faces were close. It was difficult to keep her eyes from dropping to his lips, soft and full.

“I believe you owe me a night on the town first.” Her voice was playful, trying to hide how disconcerting it was to think that they had reached such an intimate comfort in their relationship thus far without knowing each other in the biblical sense, let alone having gone out together in a non-Summerland related capacity.

He took her hand and kissed it. “Of course. Tomorrow. We’ll leave in the early afternoon so I can attend to some business matters and then we’ll go on our date. Deal?”

She agreed and let him kiss her fully on the lips then. Rather than their usual hungry kisses, this kiss felt sweet and homey. Melanie relaxed into him, wrapping her arms around his neck. They broke away but remained close; she could feel his breath tickling her nose.

“You were incredible tonight,” he told her before stepping back. “Truly a sight to behold.”

Oliver’s words echoed in her head as she lay in bed, filling her with confidence as she drifted to sleep.

With time to kill before their date, Melanie spent much of the next day in thought. Oliver and Cary were working with Steven, analyzing his powers out in the open area of the grounds, so she sat on the dock, dipping her feet into the lake. It was close enough to hear if anything went awry but far enough to have some space of her own.

It came to no surprise that her mind drifted to her dream, especially after Oliver advised her this morning to pack a bag – they’d be getting a hotel room for the night. When she gapped at him, he said they’d be out late and having a drink or two but promised not to go beyond what she thought was proper for a first date.

If Melanie was being honest, though, proper was out the window.

The dream in the lake remained their only shared sexual dream, but their mind had been connected on more than one occasion while they slept, especially over the last two weeks. One night, she felt his presence as she dreamt that her neck was sunburnt after running around the grounds. She took a knife to an aloe vera plant and applied the pulp to the burn. Upon approaching Oliver about the meaning behind the dream, he unabashedly explained he had an affinity for women’s necks.

How could she pretend to hold them to the standards of a first date after being so connected and candid with one another?

Oliver didn’t even have to touch her to read her mind. Apparently, having been in someone’s mind once made it easier to find them again, like being bound together. But touching them, like he did in the hospital, required less exertion. And being given traits and shared memories, like Cary provided, meant he could locate someone like her without them ever meeting. That was how Oliver reached her office line that fateful day.

Perhaps sharing a bed, regardless of what occurred in the sheets, was the logical next step for them.

It did make getting dressed more stressful, though. Her closet consisted of more business than casual or dress attire. Her dresses were either dark or pale but didn’t pop like Oliver’s suits did. Melanie desperately needed to go shopping and told Oliver as such when they drove south, opting to do that while he sat in on his meetings.
“You’re more than welcome in my meetings, if that’s your concern,” he said, eyes focused on the road.

She politely declined, her eyes focused on his hair tousled by the breeze. “I do have some questions, though, like when the right time to break my contract would be.”

“My financial advisor will give me his advice, along with how many employees were can take on full time. I would like you to keep your accreditation for another month or so while I hunt down professors so we have the clout to get some distinguished ones.”

“I suppose we’ll wait until then to get the rest of my things. Mostly books, no furniture, so we don’t need a large moving truck…” She trailed off. “Come to think of it, I’ve never owned furniture my entire life.”

The thought surprised her. Moving from her parents’ house to her dorm to her school apartment, she had lived with loveseats and dressers but never had the pleasure of shopping for one that fit her personality.

Oliver reached a hand and placed it on her thigh, sensing her disappointment.

“Then we’ll go shopping for some soon. You deserve to make Summerland a home to your liking.”

He drove past the college town and into the city ten miles beyond. Melanie frequented the city on her weekends and school holidays, especially as a student, enjoying the urban atmosphere and hip setting. The restaurants were nicer – classier – and there was a wider selection of clothing and food stores. Oliver parked and they parted ways, agreeing to meet back at the car in an hour.

Melanie walked leisurely down the street, passing the flower and appliance shops. She stopped at the clothing store, looking at the perfect mannequins in the window. Her reflection in the glass stared back at her, her dress more appropriate for a work interview and her messy flyaway hairs from the drive hardly looking like date material.

It was laughable contrasting her practical style to Oliver, so cultured, wearing finely tailored outfits of the latest fashion. She recalled the young nurses he flirted with at the hospital, and imagined him with a slender French woman at his arm in Paris who hung on to his every word.

Yet Oliver courted her, called her his girlfriend. While he clearly found her attractive, she wanted to feel attractive enough for him, sexy even.

Perhaps the shop owner picked up on that, because she pounced on Melanie the instant she stepped in. They picked out a number of new work options but struggled finding a dress to her liking. Melanie thought the black dresses were too slinky and the white dresses were too casual.

“What about red?” The shop owner asked.

Melanie gestured to the burgundy she wore.

“No,” the woman corrected, “deep red. Something bright and seductive, like this.”

She pulled out a floor length, long-sleeved dress, deep red in color, with dark blue flowers. The neckline was low, but not immodest, and it had a fabric belt to tie along the waist. Melanie tried it on but called the owner in.

“Am I wearing it wrong?”
Her bra was visible along the top, reminding her of trying on her mother’s clothing as a child.

“Take the bra off,” the owner said before leaving the dressing room.

Following the instructions, Melanie shimmied the bra off her shoulders and slipped her arms through the sleeves again. It was easily the sexiest dress she ever wore. Her breasts relaxed into the fabric, and the red stood out against her pale skin. Deciding quickly before she could second-guess herself, she changed and brought the dress to the counter to make her purchase. The hour was up, so she made her way back to Oliver at the car and tried not to smile like an idiot at the thought of him seeing her in her new outfit.

Of course, the hotel staff greeted Oliver warmly and handed them a key to a gorgeous, spacious room. Walking in, Melanie noticed a large, single bed and through the bathroom, a tub big enough for two. She couldn’t voice her awe though, as Oliver pushed her against the door the second it was closed and kissed her. She dropped her bags, melting into him. His warm body pressed against hers as his hands cradled her head, then wandered down her shoulder blades, her back, and her ass, cupping it.

He peeled off his jacket, their eyes meeting before he kissed her again luxuriously. His hungry eyes reflected her need. She yearned for him, yearned for this – a moment when they could breathe and attempt being a normal couple. And while lust was completely healthy and normal in her book, she didn’t want to have sex like a couple of horny teenagers, so she placed her hands against his chest. He yielded.

“I’m really enjoying this, Oliver, but I want us to proceed, if only for today, like two people going on their first date.”

He rubbed his fingers between the short sleeve of her blouse, giving her goose bumps. “And how are we proceeding now?”

“Like two people who have been dancing around each other for weeks with a lot of pent up sexual tension.”

Oliver chuckled against her neck, running kisses down her throat.

“I was right from the beginning. You are extraordinary.”

Melanie shivered and gripped his arms. “J-Just kissing.”

After doing so leisurely, they were sufficiently hot and bothered and getting closer to their restaurant reservation. She suggested they get ready. Oliver grazed his hand over her breast, teasing her nipple over her blouse, and her knees weakened.

“Is that just a suggestion?” He asked coyly.

She cleared her throat, side-stepping away before he could continue. “I’m showering,” she said, adding, “alone,” when it looked like he might follow her in. “Then I might style your hair when you’re done.”

He pulled a disinterested face, questioning what was wrong with his hair after she closed the door. Wanting to torture him after his torturous titillation of her body, she let him stew with that question.

Under the water’s strong jets, she could still feel his scorching hands on her, so she turned the water to cool as she indulged in using the hotel’s luxury shampoo and soap. Once clean and refreshed, the hot red flush on her face cooled sufficiently but not completely, she donned a robe and offered him
Oliver looked tempted to forget dinner, his eyes transfixed on where the robe ended mid-thigh, but she ushered him through and stationed herself at the mirror outside of the bathroom to use the blow dryer. Remembering their dream and his confession, she styled her hair up, clipping it into a tight updo with two long tendrils falling on either side of her face and her neck revealed. Then, she made up her face, lining her eyes, applying mascara, blush, and a deep red lipstick to match her dress.

Melanie turned to the bathroom door to ensure that she still had privacy. The water still ran and Oliver’s deep baritone filled the tile walls, so she stepped into her dress, pulling it onto her shoulders. She tied the belt, showing off her hips, and took a step while watching in the mirror to see the flash of slender leg revealed in the dress’ slits.

She looked…

“Breathtaking,” Oliver sighed, emerging in his robe. “O you whom I often and silently come where you are that I may be with you, As I walk by your side or sit near, or remain in the same room with you, You know the subtle electric fire that for your sake is playing within me.”

He approached, but Melanie swatted him away.

“Get dressed, or we’ll miss our dinner reservation.” Her tone didn’t invite argument.

Oliver continued singing his shower tune as he moved to dress. She gave him some privacy, turning away to slip on her black heels. He sang as he took her hand, signaling that he was ready, dressed in a blue suit and bellbottoms that matched the flowers on her dress. He even sang as they entered the hallway of the hotel, only relenting when she hit him, giggling.

They dined at a classy restaurant walking distance from the hotel; Oliver had reserved a table for them and ordered two glasses of wine right off the bat.

“So tell me, Melanie,” he began once the waiter departed, “what’s your favorite kind of music?”

She furrowed her brow in confusion, thrown off by the odd question.

“You wanted a first date, right? Well, we may know each other’s life events but not each other’s interests. Let’s get to know each other,” he offered.

He shifted his legs so that their ankles touched. She could feel the fabric of his sock against her bare skin.

“Mm, rock and roll,” Melanie decided. And they played the game throughout the entire meal.

Oliver loved jazz, and she shared his sentiments. He also loved a good poetry slam and a perfectly cooked pasta carbonara (without cream, of course). He had a criminal record after borrowing his mother’s car at age 10 to get him and his sister a milkshake when he read his sister’s mind and found out she had been dumped by her boyfriend for a popular girl at school. That story made Melanie’s heart tighten.

She revealed her favorite holiday was New Years because it reminded her of her father sneaking champagne in her glass, even though her mother was against it. She had a weakness for musical movies and wasn’t very good at riding a bike.

After their plates were cleared, Melanie hid her disappointment that their dinner had ended, but Oliver reassured her that there was a second part to the evening. They walked down to the nightclub
for drinks and were seated as quickly as Oliver was recognized. He ordered a martini and she ordered a cosmopolitan, enjoying its tartness as she watched couples mingling at the bar and dancing to the live music. Everything felt perfect until she spotted Allen at the bar and groaned.

“I apologize,” Oliver began.

Melanie put her hand on his and shook her head. “No, it’s fine.”

And for the first time, it really was for her. She didn’t feel flustered or embarrassed at seeing her ex, just remorseful.

“I can’t believe I wasted time thinking he could ever make me happy. The signs were always there, you know?” She said loudly to be heard over the ambiance. “I thought for years that the problem was me; I thought no one would want to marry a woman who wanted to do something with her life, or use her life to help others, so I stuck with him, hoping he would be different.”

It went unspoken that Oliver was different, in more ways than just his mutation.

“Would you like to know?” He asked.

“Hm?”

“If he saw you? If he regrets anything?”

Blinking, she finished her drink and gestured to the waiter that they’d each like another before telling Oliver yes, she would like to know. He picked up his toothpick first, and Melanie stared, fixated on his tongue pulling the olive off. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, and he leaned in.

“He saw you. He raked his eyes over your entire body and thought you looked sexy.” Oliver’s eyes lit up with blazing fire as he looked from Allen to Melanie. “He hated that—"

“That you have me?” Melanie asked boldly, sensing the pride in him.

“That you chose me,” he corrected.

Empowered by his choice of word, she leaned across the table and kissed him, only breaking away because she saw the waiter approach with their drinks. She felt warm, surrounded by so many bodies and having Oliver’s eyes only on her. The music blared.

Brazen, she drank from her glass and ran her hand down her neckline. Oliver watched, his pupils large in the dark setting.

Not fair, his voice boomed in her head, overpowering the noises that surrounded her.

While still drinking, she countered mentally, Fair is for games, and I’m done playing.

He made quick work of his drink, eating the olive with more bite this time, and she quickly downed hers as he pulled her to dance. The band’s jazz roared perfectly, the volume and staccato notes accenting their steps. Oliver spun her with one hand and she pulled at her skirt, a flash of red against her legs and the sea of dancers. He then pulled her close, their heaving chests against each other. Her arms wrapped around his neck; their eyes locked, dark, heady, and a little out of focus after their drinks.

“Let’s leave.”

She wasn’t not certain if she said it out loud or only thought it, but Oliver grabbed her hand
regardless and led her out.

The night air was cool but not cold, enough to clear her head but not distract her from everything she wanted to do. Their fingers entwined, they rushed back to the hotel. Once back in their room, Oliver threw the key to the side and pulled Melanie into a kiss she was all too willing to get lost in.

His tongue grazed her lower lip; a surge of arousal rolled through her. She undid the buttons of his jacket and tossed it side, moving then to make quick work of his shirt and pants.

He was down to his briefs, his arousal apparent. “This is a little unfair,” he complained jesting, looking between his almost naked body and her, still in her dress.

With a flick of her wrist, she pushed him to sit on the edge of the bed before untying the belt of her dress. It opened, revealing her bare breasts. Oliver hummed in appreciation. She slid the dress of her shoulders and let it fall to the ground, followed by her panties. Pushing the fabric away with her heels, Melanie kicked her shoes off last before straddling him.

Oliver nearly clawed at his underwear while kissing her, desperate to feel their naked bodies touch. Once free, he turned her around gently so that she laid on the bed and kissed from her lips down to her neck and finally to her breasts, sucking her nipples as she arched her back against the bed.

Warmth flooded not only through her body but into her head as Oliver started to join their minds, encroaching on her thoughts. The sensations grew stronger. Her hands clutched the sheets. Then it stopped.

“You were saying, ‘No,’” Oliver said worriedly, pushing his arms into the bed on either side of her to meet her eyes.

Melanie blew air out between her lips trying to regain her thoughts after being overwhelmed by the sexual desire of two people at once.

“It feels incredible, and I want to do this, just as the two of us separately,” she whispered softly. “I don’t want to lose how you make me feel.”

He bent down to kiss her, their hands meeting. He pulled her right one up and kissed the fingers before taking them into his mouth individually. She moaned, breathing in sharply.

“Then I’m going to have to make you feel twice as good to compensate.”

His mouth returned to her breasts while he slipped a hand between her legs and pleasured her. Her wetness coated his fingers, and she panted as he toyed with her by changing his pacing, alternating between fast ministrations and slow torture.

“Oliver, please,” she begged, desperate for release.

Pleasure grew within her; she thought it could tear through her at this rate. He kissed her, his teeth grazing her lip. She ground against his hand, so very close.

To her disappointment, his hand left her. She leaned on her elbows to see why and watched him reach in his bag next to the bed and pull out a condom, slipping it over his shaft.

“I want to feel you around me, Melanie. Feel you tight and hot against me as you cry out my name in pleasure,” he growled, his gravely voice making her wild.

She grew impatient. “Then do it.”
He pushed inside her, filling her, and moved deliciously slow. His hand reached between them and resumed his pleasuring. She cried out and pulled his head down for a kiss. Their lips met, kissing hotly, roughly, and she moaned against his mouth as orgasm claimed her, the waves washing over her enhanced by his thrusts.

“Melanie,” he groaned urgently. He moved faster then, her slickness pleasuring them both. “I’m… God you feel incredible.”

Wrapping her legs around him, she pushed him in deeper, sighing at the sensation. She held his head between her hands, watching his eyes slip shut. Melanie pulled his head close and kissed his earlobe.

“You make me feel incredible,” she said before taking the lobe into her mouth.

That sent him over the edge. He pushed into her as he cried out, clutching her body close before relaxing.

They kissed before he separated from her to clean up. Melanie felt the sweat on her body begin to cool, the warmth in her cheeks still radiating. When Oliver returned, he crawled into bed and pulled the covers over them, cuddling against her. He pulled her hair loose from its clip and nuzzled into her locks.

“My sunflower,” he mumbled, his chest vibrating against her back.

And they drifted to sleep.

_Melanie, if you don’t wake up now, you may never wake up again!

She sprang straight up in bed, her head swimming. Cary’s urgent voice faded away, though she tried to hold onto it. Where were these warnings coming from?

The bedside light clicked on. Hissing against her throbbing temples, Melanie peeked her eyes open to see her mother.

“What?!”

Her hands scrambled to grab hold of the sheets to cover herself, but she wasn’t naked. Oliver wasn’t there. The hotel room had even changed: new furniture sat in the corners and the walls were painted a slightly different eggshell.

“I said, ‘If you don’t wake up now, you’ll live to regret it.’ You really shouldn’t have had so much to drink at the rehearsal dinner,” Rachel scolded, holding out a glass of cool water for her.

Rehearsal dinner?

Melanie drank the water, slipping her eyes shut. The last year flooded back into her mind. It was certainly fruitful – they had a total of 22 students, 5 professors, and two investors. Renovations were complete, and Oliver just installed the new woodland creature taxidermy, claiming it was to uphold the appearance of a vacation home, but Melanie knew better. And…

She and Oliver were getting married.

After taking a shower to wash away the hangover and sweat of nervous confusion, Melanie watched her room transform into the bridal suite. Her dress hung in the wardrobe, various pieces of jewelry
adorned the table, and Kerry and Oliver’s sister Catherine entered the room, both dressed in lilac. Kerry skipped about, practicing her flower girl duties while Catherine emptied her makeup bag onto their make-do beauty station. Silent, still reeling from her shock and momentary lapse in memory, Melanie sat in the chair while her mother began to curl her hair.

Even this felt off, like déjà vu. Trying to ground herself, she looked to her left hand and the engagement ring that adorned her finger. Ah yes, their proposal was beautiful. Oliver parted the lake and stood 50 feet out from the shore, only they weren’t in the astral plane; together they strengthened his telekinesis. Melanie took steps along the soggy sand, drops from the surrounding waters tickling her calves. Their students and faculty watched from the shore as letters fell around them like snow: PUSH and WATER.

When she finally reached him, he got down on one knee, the lake’s floor dampening his pants.

“Not even the most talented poets could capture how deeply I feel for you, my dear Melanie. No dictionary written in any language could hold the appropriate words, so I’ll just come out and ask. Melanie Boyle, will you marry me?”

The water rushed around them as she kissed him and said “yes” against his lips.

Back in the present, Catherine stood before her, makeup brush poised between her delicate, manicured fingers. Her lips moved, but Melanie heard Oliver’s muffled voice instead.

_It’s time for you to turn back._

Melanie’s head felt fuzzy. She blinked, and the world shifted into place. The voices were an oddity pushed to the back of her mind.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Catherine smiled. “That if I could turn back time, I would have tried to be there more for Oliver, but I’m happy you found each other.”

Melanie felt her eyes welling with tears and tried to hold them back. “I guess I better get the tears out now before you start with the mascara,” she teased.

Once made up, she stepped into her dress. Her mother kept a serious face as she laced up the back, but the moment the veil adorned with sunflowers topped Melanie’s head, she wept.

“My beautiful daughter,” Rachel said shakily, grabbing her hands and squeezing them gently while Kerry hugged Melanie tightly around the waist, “you have only happiness ahead.”

The ceremony was difficult to plan, as Melanie and Oliver didn’t have many kin to walk down the aisle with them. She didn’t think it fair that she walked with her mother while he walked alone.

“Then we’ll both walk alone,” he told her. “It signifies us coming together on our own, joined by the lives we lived without each other and the lives we’ll live together.”

It was hard to argue something as eloquently said as that. Beholding it was a whole other level of amazement.

Melanie watched from the corner of the door of the hotel banquet hall as her mother and stepfather walked down the aisle, followed by Cary, Oliver, their priest (at her mother’s insistence), and Catherine. Her heart raced. She wanted this. Then why couldn’t she step forward? Why was her body resisting as if being pushed away?
“Are you ready?” Kerry asked, tugging on her hand. Her small pull was enough to propel Melanie forward. The force holding her back released her.

“Yes. Lead the way, darling.”

The string quartet played *Here Comes the Bride* as they walked down the aisle. She walked slowly to avoid tripping on her dress or stepping on Kerry’s heels and kept her eyes down. Murmurs of how beautiful she looked surrounded her. Finally, as Oliver lifted the veil, she locked eyes with him.

Breathless was the only way Melanie could describe how she felt. Lost in Oliver’s dark eyes, she couldn’t see anything else. She only heard her heart beating and her deep breaths. And… a cardiac monitor?

The audience laughed politely. The beeping stopped. She looked out to her friends and family, their students and professors who joined them today, with confusion. Oliver chuckled too, eyes adoringly still on her.

“Considering you’re looking at him like he’s the only person in the room, I’d say you *do* take Oliver Bird to be your lawfully wedded husband?” The priest asked with a glint in his eye.

“Yes, I do,” she said with certainty, despite the flustering madness of her mind.

Fortunately, not many people could see her flushed face, as Oliver kissed her shortly after that, and she became Mrs. Bird.

The hotel lobby hosted a cocktail reception while the hall was reset for their dinner. Melanie and Oliver held hands, his thumb grazing her wedding band as they mingled with their friends and family. Her mother said everything was just as she imagined for the wedding, and Oliver joked that he must have read her mind. When Melanie laughed, she thought it must have been the happiest day of her life.

Then she blinked.

They were dancing – their first dance as a married couple. Candles lit the tables, stars in the dimmed lighting of the room. Melanie’s head rested on his shoulder. Oliver kissed the crown of her head.

“Forever,” he said.

“Hm?” She lifted his head to look at him.

“I will be with you forever.”

She choked back tears, but her heart filled with sadness rather than joy.

Melanie blinked again.

They lay in the bed of the honeymoon suite in the hotel, writhing against each other as they kissed passionately. Tomorrow they’d be on a plane to Europe, but tonight they planned to be lost in each other’s embrace.

Oliver looked at her with a mischievous gaze before dipping down. He kissed her womanhood lovingly before making her moan with his tongue.

“Oh, Oliver,” she sighed, pushing her hips down against his mouth deliciously.

Letters appeared, falling around her. Through unfocused eyes she saw an L, an E, and a V.
“I love you,” she cried. “Yes, I love you!”

Oliver climbed up. “I love you, too,” he said, kissing her with lips that tasted of her musk.

She grinded her hips against his, desperate to feel him inside her. The letters continued to fall. Oliver kissed her neck as he pushed inside, hissing with pleasure.

“I’ll never leave your side,” he promised while finding his rhythm. He lifted her legs to bury himself in deeper.

Melanie slipped a finger between their bodies, pleasuring herself. “Never leave me,” she moaned.

But she didn’t close her eyes, even as Oliver did when overcome with sensation. She was looking for the last letter, even as their minds connected and each thrust and flick of her finger felt twice as good.

Finally, when on the edge of orgasm, her body succumbing to the waves of pleasure, the letter A formed. Melanie’s body, slick with sweat, arched as they kissed. Then Oliver cradled her head in his hands against his chest. His hips moved wildly as he finished, crying out.

Melanie deciphered the word while her body still spiraled.

L E A V E

Oliver still held on to her head, looking at her desperately.

“Melanie, you have to leave!”

Her head fell back against the pillow, and she gasped for air.

When her head rose again, she was in Cary’s lab, lying on a cool metal table while Oliver lay in the chair, unmoving. Melanie’s cardiac monitor raced, contrasting with his steady one.

“God damn it!” She yelled, sobs wracking her body.

It didn’t work. Again.

“Um,” Melanie started on the other side of the glass, sitting beside Cary, “I made it to the wedding, but just barely, before the memories started to fall apart.”

If she looked at the glass just so, she could see her reflection and how it differed from the reflection she last saw of herself on her wedding day. Seven years didn’t age her drastically, but she could see the crinkles around her eyes and the lines around her mouth. She looked exhausted, but that was to be expected with what she was mentally and physically doing to her body by joining Oliver in the astral plane.

Oliver, now in his early 40s, looked peaceful there, oblivious to the outside world. Grey peaked in his beard; the dark circles around his eyes deepened. Melanie’s heart clenched at the sight of him, still shaken by the image of him forcing her out of his mind. She loved him, yet hated him for doing this to her. For leaving her.

She had a miscarriage a month ago. The doctor had warned them that it was a bit late for either of them to try to conceive. Summerland had occupied their time, and it took ages for them to feel like
the time was right. Melanie had been four months pregnant. It killed him when they lost their child.

He started disappearing to the astral plane to figure it out, to try and use his powers to fix whatever was wrong with him or her internally. Melanie sat by his side until he’d wake up in tears, defeated. Sometimes he’d be gone for a day at a time. She finally put her foot down, begging him to stop.

“You said you’d never leave my side,” she argued.

Oliver pushed his palms into his eyes. “I know, so go with me!”

And she did. “But just this once,” she said.

In the astral plane, he tried everything. He held her womb but didn’t feel anything wrong. She offered that maybe they weren’t meant to have biological children. Their Summerland children could be enough.

He started to wander, and their settings changed from forest to desert, day to night. The temperature dropped drastically, and she clutched her arms against her for warmth. The cold slowed her steps, but Oliver carried on even as she fell behind.

“We need to leave!” She called after him.

He stopped in his footsteps, his shoulders setting with decision, before walking back to her.

“Melanie, I have these powers. For years now I’ve used them for good. I’ve been selfless! But now I want something for me. For us. I want a child.” He rested his forehead against hers. She could see the tears forming in his eyes. “And I’m not leaving until I get what I want.”

Oliver sent her out of the astral plane. Alone.

After a day, she went in to pull him out but, instead of finding him, relived their entire history together, from Cary’s phone call to the moment he sent her away. She went to the astral plane four more times, each time having the memories in there torn apart sooner and sooner.

“Mel,” Cary said, turning her attention away from Oliver, “I know you want to go back in, but his mind keeps deflecting you. I’m afraid—“

“Is it because he’s angry with me?” She asked. “Angry that I couldn’t…” Melanie trailed off, not wanting to finish her thought.

Cary adjusted his glasses. “Ah, no. I don’t think so. I think he’s trying to keep you safe. You mentioned hearing him this time, warning you to leave in addition to the bits and pieces you heard from me. Even Oliver’s not stubborn enough to kill his physical form. Perhaps he can’t get out, and he pushed you out to make sure you wouldn’t be stuck there with him. If you come out with all of your memories of him and your years together in tact, then I’m afraid that each time you go in there you’re wiping his memories of you.”

Melanie’s hands trembled in her lap. She knew what Cary wanted her to do, what would be the right thing to do, but it didn’t make it easy.

“Okay,” she sighed at last.

They wheeled him to the cold room, a room Oliver created in case something like this might happen. Various students caught her eye before looking away, their sadness and pity haunting her every step. Summerland breamed with possibility. Melanie tried not to think that he would never see the faces
that brought him so much pride again. She had to put on a mask of confidence.

She would find a way to bring him back.

Cary carefully pulled the scuba suit onto Oliver, leaving the facemask open for her.

“I won’t say goodbye to you, my love. I’ll see you soon enough.”

Leaning over his motionless body, Melanie kissed his lips before closing the mask and turning the nozzle.

A chilling chemical mixture filled the suit, leaking into the room. Cary wrapped an arm around her shoulder and led her out, advising that she rest. Feeling too empty to argue, she went to her room without another word, kicked off her shoes, and collapsed in the bed, thankful to succumb to any other reality.

Melanie’s head throbbed as she regained consciousness. Another hangover? Was she back in the endless torture of the astral plane, reliving the memories with Oliver that seemed to far away now?

“Shh, lay back.”

Even though her vision was blurry she knew Oliver was there. He eased her back down into the chair in Cary’s lab, reassuringly solid and real. But wait… The Shadow King had taken him. He had been compromised!

She tried to pull the wires and cables affixed to her skin off, desperate to silence the damn cardiac monitor and its inane beeping that followed her through memories and years of her life at Summerland. Her body was weak; her neck ached. Swallowing stung.

Warmth flooded through her mind, stopping her in her tracks. They were bonded again, after twenty years of feeling so alone.

You’re all right, Melanie, he said gently in her head.

“No,” she choked, “you’re not him.”

The memory of Oliver’s soft, dark eyes replaced with yellow tormented her. Melanie started to cry, begging that the monster just take her but leave Oliver alone, begging to let her see her husband again. She remembered everything through flashes as Oliver cycled through her memories:

Waking up to screaming and panic.

Doing a headcount and realizing that not only was the Shadow King not in David, Syd, or Kerry, but Oliver was gone, along with his car.

Getting into the same car she drove to Summerland in nearly 30 years ago with Cary, Kerry, David, and Syd, despite their warnings.

David, weakened from battle, tracking Oliver and that thing driving south.

Realizing they were going to the airport.

Seeing Oliver gliding toward a private jet through a terminal window.
David teleporting them down to the tarmac.

Running toward Oliver and seeing those yellow eyes as he turned to her. It wasn’t Oliver anymore.

The Shadow King taunting her through the sweet tones of Oliver’s voice. “Didn’t see the wife coming. So weak. Powerless. Couldn’t even bear him a child.”

Oliver falling to his knees, trying to fight back but the monster forcing him to stand and walk toward her. “What could he have seen in you?”

Letters falling around her. C H O K E.

Not being able to breathe even though he didn’t lay a hand on her.

Tears streaming from his eyes even as they looked furious, his voice pleading with the monster to stop.

Cary screaming at Oliver from behind her to fight back, for David to do something.

Falling to the ground as Oliver screamed.

The warmth was gone, their bond broken. When Melanie opened her eyes, she saw Oliver’s face so close to hers, watching her with worry. His eyes weren’t yellow but deep brown. Relieved, she started to cry but didn’t dare linger on the thought that this Oliver didn’t remember her.

“What happened next?” She asked.

He leaned against the chair, staying close by her side. “Being surrounded by people who reminded me of who I was, I could finally fight Farouk. He tried to utilize my weakness but didn’t realize it was also my greatest strength, and drawing from that, I could push him to the surface enough for David to cast him out. Together, we pushed him away, but I don’t think we were strong enough to destroy him for good.”

Melanie nodded, thankful to be free of the demon for now.

“Oh, and Kerry kicked me in the ribs for hurting you.”

Giggling hurt her throat, and leaning back didn’t help her tender head either. Oliver placed a pillow under her head, smoothing her hair away from her face.

“You hit your head pretty hard,” he said, crossing his arms, “so you probably shouldn’t drink alcohol, which is a shame, really. So much for our liquid date.”

Her heart tightened, and she forced a smile. As Oliver reached to grab a glass of water, Melanie spotted a book on the table behind him – a copy of Leaves of Grass. He spotted her gaze and shrugged nonchalantly.

“I used to recite the poems to my wife as a silly way of flirting,” he confessed.

Melanie felt as if she were being choked again, but by her emotions. She didn’t dare look at him, the pain of him remembering aspects of their relationship, but not her, too raw.

“I thought I was a good husband, you know? Until I let my own set backs get in the way of our happiness. We lost so much time, but she did so much with it. I’m so proud of her for being stronger
than I ever could be.”

His hand rested on top of hers. She peered up to her husband at last. Her husband. Gone for so long but finally where he belonged by her side.

“My dear Melanie. I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours only nor left my body mine only. You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return. I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake at night alone. I am to wait, I do not doubt. I am to meet you again, I am to see to it that I do not lose you.”

She wept, unable to contain herself. She wept for the lost years, for almost losing him for good that day.

Oliver shed his own tears as he rested his forehead against hers, the gesture like coming home. “You are my one weakness, my true strength,” he whispered, his breath tickling her face. “How could I ever leave you?”

“Oh, Oliver,” she sighed, her hand stroking his cheek, “I always knew you would come back to me.”

And as their lips met, Melanie knew he would never leave again.

End Notes

I have never worked on a story for this long. It’s been a month of outlining, which I never do, and finally writing it out. Hopefully I made the right decision in posting it all together instead of into chapters. And yes, I know I really put an expiration date on this fic by writing my desired aftermath to the season finale (also assuming that the after-credits scene with David doesn’t happen until much later), but it didn’t seem fair to bring these two characters together, tear them apart, have them brought together again in the show, and leave it at that.

Please comment and let me know what you think!

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