Upon the Rising Storm
by Walker98

Summary

Earth has fallen to the Souls and what remains of Humanity is at a crossroad. Do they
attempt to make peace with the invaders or do they fight back and in the process become
something terrifying? A growing battle looms as Wanda and her friends will find the path
to peace dangerous. At the same time Sunny starts a journey unlike any before. For the
Souls' oldest enemy have returned, and in the end neither Humans or Souls will ever be the
same.

Notes

Hello all! Well I've finally made it to the last part of my planned trilogy. Thanks for all who
have read my previous Host stories. Like before, even if you haven't read my other stories,
you should be able to follow along well enough. But please read On the Precipice and
Pathways in Darkness if you have the time.

The Host belongs to Stephanie Myers. As always - please read, enjoy, and review.
Marc Walters jumped from the last set of stairs and hit the ground running. He pushed forward with his legs, taking rapid strides as he ran down the tunnel. His shoes smacking hard into the concert floor as he moved. All his strength poured into moving as fast as possible down the passageway. The urgency of his mission driving him forward as fast as he could go.

From behind him he heard the hurried footsteps of Seeker Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. She had not leapt from the stairs to the ground like Marc. Her strides not as large as his and she had a greater distance to catch up. But she was pushing herself hard to reach him. Her breath came out in tight little gasps which echoed off the bare gray cement walls of the tunnel as she ran.

Coming to a bend in the corridor Marc barely slowed down as he shifted his weight and changed his body into the new direction. Bright Moon had closed the distance to him and managed to pant out, "Marc, wait," before Marc broke out into a dead run.

One more turn and his destination lay before him. A thick steel door, painted a dull red color, lay at the end of the tunnel. Now Marc's speed became a detriment as he needed to stop right away. Not from crashing into the steel door, but the two Seekers guarding the door.

Marc's rapid pace had both Seekers reacting in alarm. They brought up their weapons and trained them on the running Human. Marc slid to a stop before them and raised his hands high above his head. "Whoa...Whoa," he gulped out as he saw the Seekers take aim with their weapons, "I'm on your side. Remember I'm on your side!"

At Marc's plea both Seekers hesitated and Marc managed a friendly smile at the two well-armed aliens. The Seekers didn't return his smile, nor did they lower their weapons. For a few moments, both Human and Souls stared each other down. Then with the sound of more echoing footfalls, all three turned to see Bright Moon run into view.

Coming to a stop by Marc, she admonished him while still trying to catch her breath. "Marc, I told...you to...wait for me!"

Marc let out a long sigh and glanced between Bright Moon and the other two Seekers. Bright Moon was dressed in the ordinary black uniform of the Seekers Marc was used to seeing. In fact, he hardly ever saw her wear anything else. Her honey blond hair which was usually tied into a neat ponytail hung down to her shoulders in a messy display. He considered this a much more attractive appearance for her, but he decided this wasn't the best of times to bring it up. The other two male Seekers guarding the door were not dressed like Bright Moon. They instead were wearing dark gray combat armor and still held their large machine guns pointed at Marc's head.

Bright Moon turned from Marc and addressed her fellow Seekers in a calm and gentle voice. "Please, we need to see Seeker Sage of Tides. It is very urgent."

The two Seekers exchange a brief look of irritation. Lowering his weapon one turned to Bright Moon while the other continued to cover Marc. Seekers normally were always calm and pleasant to each other, like all Souls. But not now, the Seeker addressing Bright Moon could almost be called angry. "Traitor, what do you and the savage want?"

Bright Moon flinched at the label and Marc felt himself stiffen at the Seeker's comment. He would like to ask the Seeker to rethink his statement, preferably after Marc broke his nose. But with the gun still trained on him Marc had to force his anger down. Bright Moon didn't let any emotion
show on her face or in her voice. She just repeated in the same peaceful voice, "Please, this is very important. We believe the army is falling into a trap. We need to speak with Sage of Tides."

Again the two Seekers exchange glances, still unconvinced. Feeling they didn't have much to lose Marc risked adding to the Seekers' irritation. "You think I'd risk you guys shooting me if wasn't something really damn important?"

"Seeker Sage of Tides is busy with the operation to eradicate the rebel humans. He doesn't have time for interruptions," replied the Seeker still aiming his gun at Marc.

With a shake of his head, Marc turned to Bright Moon and said with rising incredulity, "It's like talking to a wall." Before Bright Moon could answer, Marc turned back to the Seekers. "Now you listen to me," he said with a dangerous edge to his voice. "You lot dragged me out to the middle of nowhere to help you take down the Facility. Old Sage told me to think outside the box to help you assholes do your job because apparently having an original thought would give you guys an aneurism. Now I need to talk to him or a lot of your Seeker buddies are likely to end up dead. So either stand aside or shoot me!"

Even though the Seekers were armed and trained to deal with 'wild' Humans like Marc, they both took a step back, clearly intimidated from Marc's outburst. Bright Moon let out a resigned sigh, she was far more use to Marc and prepared to put up with his anger. Putting herself between Marc and the Seekers she attempted to calm the situation.

"Please," said Bright Moon beseechingly, "I will take full responsibility for the interruption." She shifted uncomfortably and added sadly, "I know you think I'm a traitor. But everything I did I thought was for the greater good. Please believe me when I say I never wanted to hurt anyone and our need to talk with Sage of Tides is real and very critical."

Whether it was Marc's outburst or Bright Moon's plea, the Seekers traded one more glance of consideration and then finally relented. The one guarding Marc slowly lowered his weapon and with a sigh the other stood to the side to let them pass. Working the release to the large steel door, Marc slowly opened the way into the interior of the bunker.

"Marc, don't do anything like that again," said Bright Moon as they passed through the doorway. "They could have...hurt you." The concern for him was prevalent on her face.

Still annoyed with their delay by the Seeker guards, Marc had to bite back his stewing anger from his response. "I know, it's just I didn't like them calling you a traitor...really ticked me off."

As they entered the control center, Bright Moon had a very strange expression on her face. An odd mixture of confusion and irritation from Marc's response. With a shake of her head she said, "I don't know if I'm pleased with your attempts to protect me or annoyed."

Marc's reply died in his throat as he took in the Seekers' command and control center. The room was filled with Seekers working away at control workstations. Nearly two-thirds of the room was filled with men and woman seated in front of high-tech monitors, overseeing the operations of the assembled army of Seekers. But it was the front of the room that drew Marc's attention and caused him to come to an abrupt stop. There was a rather large alien working away on an elaborate piece of equipment vaguely shaped like an elongated glass table.

Actually the room was full of alien Souls and Marc was the only human here. But he was used to dealing with the parasitic aliens when they were in Human hosts. The multi-legged creature working at the front of the room was unlike anything Marc had ever seen. Larger than a man, it was comprised of three connected short segments with a dozen spindly limbs. Most of its legs or
arms were busy with tasks as it nimbly moved around the table-like device.

"It's a Spider," explained Bright Moon as she saw Marc staring wide-eyed at the alien.

Marc blinked as he took in the busy creature. It did indeed look like a giant spider, if not for the extra limbs. "You mean that alien race Wanda was telling us about? What's it doing here?"

"The Spiders helped during..." Bright Moon began and then looked down. She half mumbled the rest of her answer. "The invasion of Earth. They captured the first humans and assisted the Seekers during battles with your race."

"I see," said Marc with some difficulty. "So you Seekers dragged this guy out of cold storage or something?"

"I'm not sure," answered Bright Moon as she looked back up at Marc. "I know a few Spiders remained behind after the invasion was complete to assist with starship maintenance. This may be one of them."

Marc pushed off his wariness of the alien Spider and headed for the front of the control center, Bright Moon right behind him. He wasn't surprised to see Seeker Sage of Tides overseeing the Spider-thing's work. The alien Soul's host was a tall stern-faced man with neatly cropped head of hair shaded a sandy gray color. His expression was almost impossible to read as he took in Marc's and Bright Moon's arrival.

"Seeker Bright Moon, Mister Walters, what are you doing here?" His voice firm and even as ever as he spoke.

Bright Moon came to a stop before her superior. Drawing herself up and squaring her shoulders, she said crisply, "Seeker Sage of Tides, I apologize for our intrusion. But we have important news from Wanderer. As you know, she has been working with Mia..."

"The Vultures," interrupted Marc. "They're here. Working with the humans at the Facility. Right now."

Bright Moon shot Marc a frustrated glare but nodded in agreement when Sage turned to Bright Moon for confirmation of Marc's announcement. The elder Seeker was silent for a few long seconds and asked in a quiet voice, "Are you sure?"

"Wanderer felt confident of her information," replied Bright Moon. She faltered for a moment and then added carefully, "She would have communicated this information directly but the Seekers in Chicago...were unconvinced and uncooperative."

Marc snorted and quipped, "Big surprise."

Sage of Tides looked sharply at Marc and the nodded to himself. "You believe Wanderer, why should I believe you?" he asked as he gazed steadily at Marc.

As in the past Marc found himself growing unsure of himself when facing Sage of Tides. The Seeker had a very commanding appearance, as if everything near him would spontaneously assemble in order by his mere presence. And Marc had learned the Seeker's natural state of authority had little to do with his host body. He stammered for a moment and then collected himself.

"Look," said Marc with his best effort at calm certainty, "you wanted me to be a fail-safe for this mission. To see what you might miss, so I am doing that." Marc began to count off on his fingers as
he spoke. "Look at what we've seen – The Human rebels you're going up against have successfully launched a plague against your people that defied all your medicines. Medicines that are far more advanced than any technology Humans developed. Then they turned Kane Adams immune to being controlled by an inserted Soul. Again something your Healers have never seen before in any species you've…conquered." Marc bit back his resentment in his last word. He then had to take a deep breath for his next sentence. "And then Mia…everything we've learned from her."

"You've made these points before," said Sage of Tides, his face and voice decisively neutral.

"My point is these people of the 'Facility' have had help. A lot of your technology was acquired from these Vultures." Marc made a gesture to the Spider still working on the apparatus before them, "Yes the Spiders improved that technology, but it's still based on the Vultures' original work. Who better to show how to defeat or repurpose those tools than the people who originally made them?"

Marc pressed his case as a thought came to him. "Think about it, they were a space-faring race. That's how you got your first spaceships. Some of them could have escaped your take over."

"That was a very long time ago," replied Sage as he considered Marc's argument.

Without skipping a beat Marc shot back, "It's a big galaxy, lots of places to hide. They could have been waiting for the right time to strike back."

"There is logic to the Human's statement," came a soft metallic voice from beside Marc. He jerked in surprise when he realized the voice had come from the Spider. Even as the creature continued to work one of its large dark eyes examined Marc with a glassy stare.

"Umm…thanks," said Marc trying not to shudder from the alien's unnerving stare.

"Yes, thank you, Enquirer of Facts," replied Seeker Sage.

The same smooth mechanical voice replied, "An observation. Your thanks are unnecessary." Marc realized the sound wasn't coming from the Spider but from a small device on one of its limbs. Some sort of translator device he decided. He didn't see a mouth on Enquirer of Facts and didn't feel like getting closer to the creature to find one.

Drawing Marc's attention back to his original purpose Sage of Tides asked, "If you are correct, why would the Vultures help your people?" For the first time, the Seeker's cool and imposing appearance faltered. "Their race was…cruel and…unkind to every species they encountered."

"With respects Seeker Sage of Tides," began Bright Moon as Sage turned from Marc to gaze steadily at the blond-haired Seeker. "They would have a common enemy to unite them with the Humans…us."

Marc regarded the two Seekers and added mildly, "If there is anyone in the universe itching for some payback and could possibly be in a position to get some, it would be the Humans and Vultures."

Seeker Sage of Tides was silent as he deliberated. Both Marc and Bright Moon exchanged uneasy glances as they waited. After almost a minute, he turned and addressed one of the Seekers working at a nearby workstation. "Seeker Harmony, please get a status of all ground commanders. I want a full assessment of our situation. I want them to check and then recheck their positions and their readiness. Report on any anomalies, no matter how small."

"Yes, Seeker," replied the young woman at her station.
Sage turned back and addressed Marc. His voice was still confident, but there was an undertone of warning in his words. "And how do you feel about the possibility of the Vultures' involvement? Do you look forward to some 'payback'?"

Instead of directly answering the Seeker, Marc turned to Bright Moon. While looking at the young woman, Marc replied to Sage's question, "You know how I feel." A sad smile formed on Bright Moon's face at Marc's answer.

Interrupting all three of them an older man in the second row of Seekers spoke up urgently. "Seeker Branston at position Gamma reports intercepting a narrow beam transmission. It would appear to be meant for the rebel Humans."

"Source?" asked Sage of Tides at once.

The Seeker's face stared blankly at his screen. His gray eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. "This doesn't make sense…the source of the transmission is coming from near the orbit of the moon."

"Frequency analysis," commanded Sage of Tides.

Another Seeker spoke up in response to Sage's question, but he also was no less confused by the information he was receiving. "The message was sent from one of our starships. The message was unencrypted text."

Marc beat Sage of Tides to the obvious question, "What does it say?"

The Seeker hesitated to answer Marc's command but did so when the older Seeker nodded his head in agreement with the Human's question.

"It says - 'Kingdom Come.'"

Now all the Seekers sitting at the various workstations stopped their activities and stared at each other with a mix of different emotions. Some were puzzled, a few more annoyed, and still other had a flicker of fear cross their faces. Unfazed, Sage of Tides walked down the center row. His orders were still clear and concise. "I want the ship that sent that transmission contacted. It is to stop and check for any anomalies. I want satellite reconnaissance to check ever square centimeter of the entire area…"

Sage was cut off as several alarms signaled on different Seeker workstations at the same time. At once there was a rising buzz of activity from all the Seekers working in the control center. Orders and then counter-orders were quickly being relayed between the control staff at the bunker and other Seeker locations.

"What is happening?" demanded Sage of Tides.

Several seconds passed while the murmur of voices only grew and no one responded. Sage cleared his throat and was about to speak when the older Seeker who had first reported the strange transmission replied, "I'm getting damage reports coming from multiple cities around the globe."

"What!?" cried Sage of Tides.

"I don't know…for sure," replied the Seeker with growing quiver in his voice. "The messages are on emergency channels. I can't get a response…too much cross traffic."

With a rising horror on his face Marc said in a shaky whisper to Bright Moon,"Oh no." Bright
Moon was also looked stricken as the reports of damage worldwide only increased.

One of the Seekers, a middle-aged woman with rusty red hair yanked her headset off and pushed away from her console in fright. "It can't be...It can't be..." she cried out in pure panic. Her voice carried a strong English accent to her words. Nearby Seekers came to her aid, trying to comfort her even as the outside chaos threatened to overwhelm them. She turned to her fellow Seekers and said in a horrified whisper, "The report said London is burning..."

Bright Moon came to Marc and he pulled her to him. Her eyes were wide with fear as he held her. "We were too late," she said in a frightened whisper.

Marc never had a chance to respond when within the time of a single heartbeat the entire bunker shook with immense force. It was as if the ground above was hit by a fist of an angry giant. The floor heaved upwards suddenly only to rush downwards with even greater force. Everything in the room flew about, men, women, tables, chairs, computers, tools, and even the Spider with all its legs flailing chaotically as it tumbled about. All of it to smash down to the floor when the ground stopped reverberating. The lights in the room flickered defiantly for a moment and then were extinguished.

The noise of crashing bodies and equipment was deafening, but above that noise rose an even louder sound. It was as if a thousand trains were colliding with a thousand more. It was a tearing, a ripping, cracking, the sounds of tons upon tons of reinforced cement and iron bent and twisted from forces far beyond what they were designed to withstand.

In the complete darkness Marc tried to find Bright Moon, the alien Seeker who had against all possibilities become his true love. He tried to call her name, but it was drowned out by the continuing rumbling as the bunker began to collapse in on itself. Then there was one terrible moment of silence as the rumbling stopped. Marc called for Bright Moon again, but there was no response. And then the walls of the room buckled with a single sound of ruin and entombed them all.
Two Weeks Earlier...

Ian O'Shea closed his eyes tight. There was nothing but inky blackness behind his eyelids. He didn't really need to close his eyes, the tunnel he stood in was already in absolute darkness. But the action helped bring him focus. He needed to concentrate on his next task, it wasn't going to be easy.

Stepping forward, Ian slowly began moving down the passageway. The floor of the corridor was cracked and uneven so his footing was less than firm. He recalled what Dell and Jason had taught him. Walk on the balls of your feet, keep your center of gravity low, and most important – listen. The sounds which echoed through these tunnels could be used as guidance, communication, and warn of coming danger.

Under the city of Chicago lay miles of drainage systems, old freight tunnels, reservoirs, and even old cable-car tunnels from more than a century ago. All of these formed a massive maze Ian was slowly moving through. This underground labyrinth had provided protection and refuge for a small band of Humans. These underground dwellers hid themselves from a much larger population of aliens on the surface. Aliens that looked and sounded just like humans, at least their bodies did.

'120 paces till I reach the end of the tunnel,' thought Ian as he slowly picked up his pace. He was careful each time he stepped forward. Each footstep placed with meticulous timing, he needed to be silent as he moved.

Living in these tunnels had taught the Humans much, how to move and navigate without any light. To pass silently and stealthily as the aliens who called themselves Souls sometimes sent search teams down into these tunnels. Known as Seekers, there were a scourge to the dwindling population of free Humans still on Earth.

Nearing his one-hundred and tenth step Ian could tell he was coming to the end of the corridor. Letting his hearing do the seeing, he heard the faint echo of his movement from the wall in front of him. He could either turn left or right. Ian focused on remembering what lay in both directions. To the left he remembered the tunnel went on straight for almost a mile. A good way to get some distance, but there were few exits that way and he could easily get himself cornered with no way out. If he went right, the shaft would break up into multiple paths. Much easier to hide.

Turning to the right Ian almost started walking again when he heard it. A faint clip-clop sound of someone moving less than stealthily in the tunnel. Someone coming from the right. Ian suppressed a groan and turned to the left. The tunnel's surface was smoother here and he made better progress. But he only went about thirty feet in his estimation before he stopped. Listening he heard the soft footsteps behind him. They were the sound of someone who wasn't certain if they were going the right way. Indecisive, starting and then stopping, slowly seeking him.

Ian opened his eyes to the ocean of darkness around him. Buried here deep in the Earth there wasn't even a glimmer of light. Therefore, Ian's light starved eyes could already make out a faint glow coming from behind him. His pursuer had a flashlight.

Usually he would consider someone with a light source to have the upper hand in this inky blackness. However, Ian had learned much since coming to Chicago. Yes, light could find you out in these tunnels. But every light cast a shadow and there were many places to hide in the shadows.
Picking up his pace, Ian sacrificed some of his stealth for speed. If his hunter did follow him down this tunnel, he would need some distance to put his plan into action. Ian recalled the Arizona caves he had lived in for the last two years. There, like these tunnels, he had gotten used to moving through them until he knew every contour of the stone floor. That even in utter blackness he could move without stumbling. Ian had worked hard to learn these man-made caves, but he still had a lot of ground to cover. Putting his foot down, Ian realized he’d stepped into a divot. Sometime in the past a chunk of cement had broken free from the ground and left a sizable hole. A hole which caused Ian to misstep and then clumsily, and loudly, hit the ground.

"Oh, damn it," breathed out Ian in anger. He had been trying to move too fast while his body's center of gravity was too high. Righting himself and then yanking his foot out of the hole, Ian risked a look back down the dark passageway. The soft glow of a flashlight was still visible, but Ian didn't hear the quiet padding of footsteps. His stalker had stopped moving and was now listening. Ian stood absolutely still, daring to not breath, and waited.

All at once the glimmer of the light behind him began to move. Now a new sound reached Ian's ears, the sound of someone running. The smack-smack of feet landing on hard cement of the tunnel. Cursing himself again for making such a stupid mistake, Ian began to move again. He could try sprinting himself, but he would be running blind and after his last mistake he didn't want to screw up again.

As he moved, Ian pressed his right hand on the wall of the tunnel. The sounds echoing from his pursuer was growing louder with each second. Ian knew he had to be close now, just a little more. Twenty steps went by, then thirty. The light behind Ian had grown strong enough to turn the black surrounding Ian to a deep gray. He only seconds now before his relentless tracker closed the distance and caught sight of him.

Ian's hand on the old stone wall skittered along its surface as he moved, just the cold hard cement against his fingers. And then he felt nothing but cold, dry air. He had reached the side tunnel. Ian wanted to shout for joy, but he kept his mouth shut. He was out of time. Sliding to the right, Ian pushed himself into the cramped space.

Calling the passage he found himself in a tunnel was being very generous. It was in reality a narrow crack barely wider than Ian. Over the years, this section of the drainage system had deteriorated to the point a large crack had formed. A crack that had been carefully widened by the Humans rebels to the point it could be used as a hiding spot. Ian pressed himself as far back into the crack as his tall body would allow. It certainly wasn't easy for him as the sides of the crack were rough and uneven. A particularly sharp edge poked Ian painfully in the back.

The footsteps had slowed and Ian could make out the sounds of someone panting. The light of the flashlight was now intensely bright to Ian's oversensitive eyes. He began to slowly lower himself down, not easy to do in this constricted hole. He could feel his leg muscles already begin to cramp as he forced his body down. Ian knew he was in a pretty awkward position and if he was caught he would have no chance of escape. But his only real choice was to successfully hide here and then turn the tables on his would-be-tracker when they had passed him.

The light of the flashlight beamed directly into the crack. Ian felt every inch of his body freeze as solid as ice. He kept his head lowered, letting his dark hood cover his face completely. Ian dared not even breathe. The light panned through the crack and shadows splayed in all direction as the light bounced off the uneven sides. With his dark clothing and hunched close to the floor, Ian was lost in those shadows.

Turning from his unseen prey the figure carrying the light turned in a slow circle in the middle of
the tunnel. The light filled the outside corridor, but Ian remain hidden. Slow seconds trickled by
and finally the person returned to his original slow walk down the passageway. Once the light
began to recede, Ian finally began to breath.

Gradually and more than a little stiffly Ian began to pull himself up in the tight space of the fissure
in the wall of the larger drainage tunnel. Silently he pulled himself from the crack. In front of him,
the silhouette of his pursuer was illuminated by his own flashlight. Ian smiled to himself, down
here light was a double edge sword. As much as it could help in dark, the light betrayed its user.
Unseen, Ian crept closer to his adversary.

Still uncertain of his quarry, the man in front of Ian was slowly panning his flashlight back and
forth as he studied the path before him. Now Ian was right behind the squat man. Looming over
him, Ian jabbed out with his index finger into the man's back like a mock gun. At his finger's
contact, the man went stiff in alarm.

"Bang, you're dead," said Ian with dark humor in his voice.

The short man breathed quickly and the let out a dry laugh. "I knew you were behind me."


With a slow sigh, the stout Chicago rebel turned to face Ian in the tunnel. Jason folded his thick
arms in front of him and said after a moment of contemplation, "I suppose so. You were hiding in
the crack back there, weren't you?"

"Yeah," said Ian as he rolled his shoulders to work a kink out of his back. "Wasn't easy. Thought I
was going to get stuck in there."

Retracing their steps Jason probed the crack with his flashlight. He nodded slowly to himself, "Not
bad, I didn't think you could get yourself in there." He chided himself, "Didn't look close enough,
and I should have." Jason turned back to Ian and added quietly, "If I were a Seeker, I would have.
They are very thorough."

"Yeah, I know," replied Ian grimly. He had a good deal of experience with Seekers. They could be
relentless and as Jason had said, very thorough when they hunted their prey.

"Just saying," said Jason as he spread his arms and made a small shrug. "Still not bad, you've been
learning a lot in the last two months."

As they began to walk down the tunnel Ian was silent as he considered his latest 'test'. He'd spent
nearly every day down here for hours at a time with either Jason, Dell or one of the other Humans
from Chicago for the last week. Sometimes it was lessons on how to move and navigate. Other
times, like now, he was tested as one or more people hunted him in the dark. Even after all his
practice Ian was pretty sure he had only scraped the surface of what the others knew about this
underground maze.

Turning down a new passageway, Ian asked Jason, "Same time tomorrow then?"

"No," replied Jason after a moment hesitation. "Bright Moon on Fallen Snow says the Seekers will
be running another expedition down here tomorrow." With a slow smirk forming on his face Jason
added, "We don't want to be here when that happens."

"Hell no," replied Ian with a grin of his own. Curious he asked, "How many are they sending this
time?"
"Marc said she believed it would be about half the Seekers in the city, about fifty in all," said Jason with a shake of his head.

"Still can't believe she's on our side?" queried Ian.

Jason was silent as they walked along. Ian briefly thought about the blond-haired blue-eyed Seeker who had at one time hunted Jason and the other rebels. Now she was allied with the very same Humans. There were very few Souls who would be willing to go against their own people and try to save the remaining Humans. For a Seeker, called to protect Souls and eliminate the Human threat, it was nearly unthinkable.

But in the last few months the city of Chicago had been the location of some truly remarkable events. An outbreak of a virulent plague had infected thousands of Souls in Chicago. The disease resisted every attempt by the Souls' Healers to provide treatment. The Humans that hid in the city also became ill. With both sides desperate, they did the unthinkable. Humans formed a truce with the Souls and worked together to cure the sickness. Seeker Bright Moon had reevaluated her beliefs about Humans, in no small part because of her growing relationship with the Human's rebel leader, Marc Walters.

"Ummm," replied Jason at last, "Trusting a parasite isn't the easiest thing to do. Trusting one of their Seekers is damn near impossible" Jason looked up quickly after he realized what he called the Souls. With a weak smile he added, "Sorry, no offense to Wanda."

At one time Ian would have grown swiftly angry if someone insulted his Wanda. But Wanda was quick to point out to Ian that Humans had every reason to fear and distrust her people. She was a Soul, a small silver centipede-like creature which lived in and controlled the body of young blond-haired woman. Her people had systematically conquered Earth and driven humanity to near extinction. Wanda never resented anyone who didn't like her. She was kind and gentle to all, always forgiving, and with a few exceptions entirely selfless. It was Wanda's pure generosity, her kindness, which led Ian to fall in love with her.

"It's alright," said Ian with a shrug. "You guys have made Wanda and I feel right at home here. Almost everyone has been descent to Wanda." Dark memories intruded into Ian's mind when he first met Wanda. Of his hands around her neck, squeezing tight as she desperately struggled to breath. He pushed the old, unwanted, memories away with a deep sigh. "Trust me, your guys welcome for Wanda was far more pleasant than ours out in the desert."

Leading Ian down a small side tunnel Jason replied thoughtfully, "I guess somewhere along the line we became more…tolerant of the Souls. Maybe if we hadn't meet Auntie it would have been a lot different."

'Auntie' was the affectionate name given by Jason and the others to Autumn Gusting Wind. A kindly Soul who had first helped and protected the Humans during the early days of the Souls' invasion of Earth. It was with her help that this small clan of humans had been able to survive in the city. She had loved them, and they loved her back. And they were greatly sadden when she became one of the many Souls to succumb to the mysterious plague.

"You guys found Autumn years before we met Wanda. There might be more Souls out there than we think who would be friendly to us," speculated Ian.

"Trust me, not many," replied Jason with a frown. "Back in the day, Autumn tried speaking with other Souls about humans. Carefully, of course, nothing to reveal how far she was going to protect us. Most didn't even want to hear about it. We were just bunch of violent animals to most of them." Jason's face clouded with anger. "They take over billions of us, and we're the monsters."
"Yeah, I know," said Ian sympathetically. There was no denying that most Souls still greatly feared 'wild' Humans. They saw humans as vicious and savage race, no longer worthy of their world. Souls were kind and peaceful to each other, always. The violence humans were capable of inflicting was nearly incomprehensible to the gentle Souls. And nothing proved this to the Souls more than when they learned the source of the plague. The cause of the illness, a seemingly simple bacteria, was found to have been developed and released by an enigmatic group of people who work for an organization ominously called the 'Facility.'

Jason and Ian reached the end of the tunnel. It dead ended at a brick wall. The old ruddy colored bricks had faded to a dull brown and looked to be barely held in with the decaying mortar. Both men did a quick check as they looked back to ensure no one had discreetly followed them. Jason pushed with his hand on a weathered old brick to the right side of the wall and then quickly yanked on two more bricks in the middle of the wall. There was a faint clunk from behind the barrier and after a few seconds both Jason and Ian slowly pushed the 'wall' back until it swung wide open.

As the two men made their way into the hidden section of the tunnels, Jason cleared his throat. Ian glanced back as the fake wall clicked back into place and then back to Jason. The stocky man had a quizzical expression on his face as he stared at Ian.

"What?" asked Ian as they resumed their walk.

"Do you trust Seeker Bright Moon?" inquired Jason. His face had grown tight with concern. "I mean, you're still kind of an outsider here. You never had to deal with her when she was chasing us. What's your opinion of her?"

Ian considered his answer while they walked along. He and Wanda were a relative new addition to this little clan of Humans in Chicago. They traveled here just over two months ago. After learning about the plague and the unusual alliance between Humans and Souls, Wanda had come hoping to find these Humans and work for real peace between their two people. They had barely arrived and located Marc's group when members of the Facility led a series of brutal attacks.

In the space of a day, the soldiers of the Facility had brought the city to utter panic. Agents decimated the ranks of the Seekers and took a dozen Souls hostage. In an effort to destroy any chance of peace between Humans and Souls they killed Tim, a young boy, and made it look like the Souls were responsible. Enraged Marc's group nearly launched their own attack on the Souls before they learned of the deception. In the end, it was Marc who faced off against the leader of these soldiers. A psychopath named Adams, who revealed the truth about the plague and the coming war between the Facility and the Souls. They had little concern about how many people died, as long as the Souls were destroyed.

Mulling his answer over carefully Ian said, "She's had plenty of opportunities to betray us, and she's helped keep the remaining Seekers off our trail."

"But do you trust her?" asked Jason, "Everything we've heard lately sounds like the Seekers are getting very paranoid. If they start getting suspicious of her, what's to stop them from forcing her to tell them everything she knows?"

"Souls would never harm her, they're just not capable of violence towards each other," said Ian. "And Marc trusts Bright Moon."

"Yeah," replied Jason with a grimace, "but I don't think Marc is entirely level-headed when it comes to dealing with her."

Ian wondered if Jason's real concern was Bright Moon's and Marc's budding romance. As much as
he had found these people to begrudgingly accepting of Souls, they were more than a little perplexed by Ian's and Wanda's relationship. Human and Soul relationships were still unusual and more than a little rare. An affair between a Human and Seeker should have been impossible. No one had spoken openly against Marc's relationship, but Ian sensed there were limits to what his new family was willing to accept.

"Look," said Ian to Jason as they crossed through from the regular passageway to a narrow damp tunnel. He had to step carefully as they made their way forward. "I don't know Bright Moon very well so I'm not in a good position to judge, but Wanda and she have talked. Wanda thinks in a lot of ways Bright Moon is very lonely. That as a Seeker she feels isolated from her own people. That in some ways she's better at relating to Humans than Souls."

Jason was silent again as he digested Ian's response. Ian wasn't sure how the man felt about his answer. They were now nearing their shared destination, a set of old stairs leading up from the tunnels to their hidden home in an old hotel building. As they neared the base of the creaky old stairs, Ian saw there was a figure sitting on the bottom step. His smile only grew as he saw who sitting there waiting for him.

"Wanda," said Ian as he and Jason drew to a stop in front of his petite golden-haired, "what are you doing here?"

"I'm taking a break from our discussions with Healer Long Rivers. I figured I would come wait for you," said Wanda with a growing smile of her own. She rose gracefully off the bottom of the stairs and Ian moved to wrap his arms around her. Taking a good look at Ian dressed in his dark cloak and hood she put up a hand to block his embrace. "You're dirty," she admonished him.

Ian looked down at himself and then Jason. It was hard to not get filthy running around these old tunnels. With a shrug of his shoulders, he pulled Wanda's small form to him, despite her protests. She let out a happy shriek as Ian pulled her to him. Putting his arm protectively around Wanda, Ian saw Jason give a quick roll of his eyes at his and Wanda's display.

But Ian also saw Jason focus on Wanda's eyes. The short man's flashlight was reflecting off the silver in Wanda's eyes. The silver, the trademark of a Soul, cast dancing mirrored light on the steps as all three of them began to ascend the stairs. It wasn't easy for Jason, hell it wasn't easy for any of them. The idea of making a lasting peace with the aliens that had nearly driven mankind to extinction has a bitter pill to swallow. But this small band of rebel Humans was in a unique position to find peace with the Souls. Even while the Seekers still hunted for them and members of the Facility were undoubtedly planning their next attack. Between the big and the little it was a difficult time for them all.

"Com'on," grumbled Jason as he led the way up the stairs. "Getting late in the day and I'm starved."

Wanda and Ian exchanged smiles and followed after Jason.
"Sunny," said Melanie Stryder as she poked her head into the small chamber that made up her and Kyle's small sleep quarters, "are you ready?"

The Soul named Sunlight Passing Through the Ice looked up from where she was packing a bag. It was an old duffle bag of Kyle's, fade to a washed out blue, the bag had seen better days. Its strap was broken and one nylon handle was attached to the bag by only a few threads. Luckily Sunny didn't have too many clothes and the piece of luggage wasn't even half full of her belongings.

In a soft gentle voice she replied, "Yes, I think so..." She trailed off and looked down at the floor of the cave. Her shoulders sagging, she let out a long sigh.

Melanie crossed into the small room and touched Sunny lightly on the arm. Kyle's work to widen Walter's old room resulted in a modest increase in size. Charitable to call it cozy for two people, but by all appearances Sunny loved the little room she shared with Kyle. She had taken to decorating the walls with drawings using pastel chalk, pictures representing sights from the ice world of the Bears. With a reassuring smile Melanie said, "Sunny, it's going to be fine. Kyle and I will be with you the entire time. Nothing bad is going to happen."

Sunny tried to return Melanie's smile, but it mostly came out as a minor twitch at the ends of her mouth. "I wish this weren't necessary, I would much rather stay here."

Melanie resisted getting annoyed and kept her voice even. Getting angry wouldn't help with Sunny, raised voices only caused the Soul to cower and retreat. "You've been on raids before, both with Wanda and then just by yourself. You're going to do just fine."

"But it's going to be so much longer," complained Sunny with a shake of her head. It sent her long curly black hair swishing around her face. Still pensive she continued, "I'm worried I'm going to mess up. Attract the attention of the Seekers and get you all you caught."

Melanie pursed her lips. She was going to need to take a different approach. The last two months had seen their supplies run dangerously low in the caves. A visit to several cities was needed to replenish everything from food to gardening tools. Up until recently a long term raid would have included Wanda. The golden-haired Soul was an expert at raids and Wanda, much to her chagrin, had become a superb liar when dealing with her own kind. Sunny, on the other hand, had only gone on one short foray to a nearby city. She was prone to panic attacks when it even came to the idea of lying. But Wanda was gone and so it feel to Sunny to fill her role.

"I know you're scared," said Melanie as she sat down on the mattress that made up Sunny's and Kyle's bed. She pulled her long legs up to her chest and patted the space next to her on the cushion. Sunny sat down next to her, her eyes still downcast in a mix of distress and anxiety. Melanie worked hard at presenting a calm and reassuring tone for the little Soul.

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"I get scared too," began Melanie. "And you're right, it's so much nicer staying here at the caves. Sometimes I wish we never had to leave them." She shared a brief smile with Sunny. Since Kyle brought her to the caves, the Soul had slowly but surely relaxed and made friends with many of the Humans in the caves. Like Wanda, Sunny seemed determined to be of use to their small community and create as little discord as possible. She worked any job she was given without complaint and never took more food than she absolutely needed.

"But," explained Melanie, "I remember that everyone here depends on the raids. There is a lot of
stuff we need that we can only get in the cities." She made a faint motion with her hand indicating Doc's and Sharron's room down the corridor. "Doc's nearly out of HEAL. What happens if someone gets hurt and he runs out of medicine?"

Sunny's eyes widen and with a tiny shake of her head she replied with concern rising in her voice, "No, that would be bad." She drew a deep breath and slowly let it out slowly. "I guess I have to help." She gave Melanie a tentative smile and stood up from the bed.

As Melanie stood up, Sunny added in a wistfully, "I just wish Wanderer was going with us. I miss her."

"So do I Sunny," replied Melanie. Her own words growing thick in her throat as thought about her 'Soul Sister'. Wanda was working away at forging a peace agreement with a group of friendly Souls and Humans in Chicago. This group worked in secret, but they had hopes in time they could take their initiative for co-existence between Humans and Souls public. As usual, the major roadblock towards finding such peace was the Seekers.

Ever since their near-disastrous expedition to Chicago, the Seekers had been hunting for them. During their time in Chicago, Lacey had briefly impersonated the black clothed Seeker she had once been. Her ruse was discovered and Lacey barely escaped. This had set off a chain reaction with the ranks of the Seekers. They had believed the Soul controlling Lacey to be dead, lost out in the desert while she vainly looked for Humans. With the discovery that her host was alive and well, the Seekers had returned in force to the surrounding desert.

While the Seekers didn't know about Jeb's caves, they left barely an inch of the surrounding area unscratched. Helicopters swarmed in the sky as teams of Seekers looked on the ground for any evidence of Humans, past or present. And they would have been found if it weren't for the help of the two Seekers in Chicago. Bright Moon on Fallen Snow and Night Ember Lights provided information on the Seekers' movements and search patterns to the Marc and the other rebels in Chicago. They in turn covertly relayed the information to Jeb and the others via Ham radio.

Even with the inside information on the Seekers search plans it had been a harrowing time. The sounds of the helicopters flying overhead brought up bad memories in Melanie, remembering when Wanda had sat with Walter in her body as the Seeker repeated passed over. Fearing the Seekers were using inferred monitors, they dared not even use the stoves to cook food. Jeb had joked that they must have their own spy satellite monitoring them by now. No one had found his joke funny.

Eventually the Seekers had given up the search and moved on to other areas to search for rouge Humans. Life was slowly returning to normal in the caves. With the pressing need for supplies Jeb and Jarred had decided they would risk leaving the safety of their home.

Leaving Sunny to finish her packing Melanie walked down the path in caves leading back to the main cavern. As she entered the massive chamber, the rays of the afternoon sun reflected brightly on the overhead mirrors. In the center of the room stalks of the waist-high corn grew in neat lines. About a dozen men and women worked away at watering and fertilizing the dry soil. She took sight of the young boy and the old man working at one side of the field.

"But Uncle Jeb," she heard Jamie complain as she walked up, "why can't I use the radio to talk to Ian and Wanda?"

Melanie caught the sound of a resigned sigh from her uncle. "Jamie, that radio isn't a toy. It's not for making social calls."

Jamie grumbled under his breath as he went back to watering the soil from his rusty worn bucket.
His mumbling was something her brother was doing more often these days. He had all the prospects of becoming quite the surly teenager. Melanie's motherly instincts towards her brother warred with her sisterly annoyance at his behavior. She decided on a tactful response to his peevish attitude.

"Jamie," she began once she had closed the distance to him. "I know you miss them, we all do. But we can't use the radio for more than just few minutes a day. We can't risk the Seekers finding out."

"I know," growled Jamie in response, "I get it Mel, I'm not stupid."

This was becoming his default response to her lately. Trying and failing to keep her voice down she shot back, "Jamie, I didn't say that. I know…"

Jamie interrupted her rudely as he dropped his bucket on the ground. It made a loud splash as the water sloshed out. "You don't listen to me! It's not like I want to talk for an hour. Just wanted to hear…their voices, that's all."

"Hey now," said Jeb in usual slow and deliberate words as he watched the two sibling's exchange grow heated. He nodded towards Jamie and spoke calmly, "Jamie you just keep working on this here corn. I need to speak to your sister alone."

"Fine," came Jamie's one-word response as he turned back to his bucket. Jeb's lips pursed together in a tight line, but he said nothing further. Melanie was more than ready to keep up going with her brother, but her uncle gently but firmly took her by the arm. He led her a short distance down the rows of corn till they exited the crops and they were well out of earshot of everyone else in the main cavern.

"Don't be minding Jamie," said Jeb after giving Melanie a few moments to cool down. "He's a Stryder man and at the age where he's mostly spit and fire."

"Uncle Jeb, he can't act around acting like that…" started Melanie.

"Easy," replied Jeb as he held up his hands in a placating manner. "I know…but there is no use getting all worked up now. You're going to be leaving soon and there is no point having bad blood between you two." Jeb didn't need to add the danger Melanie would be in while she was away and the possibility she wouldn't come back.

Letting out a tired sigh, Melanie's eyes drifted to the floor. "He still blames me for leaving Wanda behind…" She trailed off and then she looked back up at Jeb. "But it wasn't like that! It was Wanda's choice! You know how she is when she gets it in her head to do something."

"Oh, I know," replied Jeb with a smile. "Trust me, I understand." He looked around the cavern as the people tended to the crops. "We owe those city folk plenty and if Wanda can pull off her plans, we'll all benefit. It's just Jamie is still young enough to feel like he's been abandon by Wanda."

Melanie gave her uncle a wry smile and said, "If Wanda heard that she'd tear across the country to reassure Jamie."

Jeb's smile grew to a broad grin. "Well, why do you think I keep that boy off the radio? We need to keep Wanda focused on her work. But don't worry about Jamie, he'll come around in time, you'll see."

"What about Jamie?" came Jared's voice from behind her. Melanie turned to see Jared and Kyle walking up to join them. Taking Jared's extended hand, Melanie pull the suntanned man close to her. Kyle followed after him and the four of them formed a small circle.
"It's nothing," replied Melanie with a dismissive wave of her hand at her brother. "Jamie is just being...well he's being a teenager."

"Ah," replied Jared. He'd seen enough examples of Jamie's recent behavior and Mel's reactions to her brother's antics. Lately he had found himself playing the peacemaker between the two. Now he wisely decided to not get involved.

"Well then," said Jeb, drawing the conversation back to himself. "I see the three of you of are ready to go." He gave a quick glance around the cavern and inquired, "Where's Sunny?"

"She was finished packing in her room," replied Melanie.

"And how is she?" asked Jeb as turned to Melanie and then Kyle. There was meaning in his words as he looked between the two. Responsibility for everyone in the caves was failing on the Soul's small shoulders and Jeb wanted to be sure she was ready.

Melanie glanced to Kyle. The elder O'Shea brother nodded slowly to himself and then answered. "Sunny's nervous of course." Kyle grew somber as he continued, "But we've talked a lot. She really wants to help us. She would never intentionally hurt anyone here."

"No one here is saying that," said Jeb.

"But we're keeping things from her," replied Kyle as he focused on Jeb and then on to Melanie, "I don't know if that's a good idea. Once she's back around Souls, she's bound to hear what happened in Chicago."

Melanie grimaced, it was on her recommendation that Sunny not be told about everything that had happened in on their expedition. Of their deadly encounter with Agents from the shadowy Facility. How these men were 'Recovered'. Their brains and the attached Souls surgically modified to allow the Human's conscious to regain control of their bodies. They readily passed as a Soul, their retained the silver-ringed eyes. It allowed them to infiltrate the Souls' society with deviating effects.

"I know," said Melanie with a sigh, "But I was worried it would freak Sunny out. She already has a lot to worry about and I didn't want to add to it." She gazed to the ground, her voice growing soft as she recalled her last encounter with these 'Recovered' humans. "I don't know what was done to these people, but the one called Williams," and she shuddered at the man's name, "something woke up within him...something dark and twisted."

She felt Jared squeeze her hand and she leaned into him for support and comfort. Kyle weighed her argument for a moment and then shrugged non-committedly. "I'm just saying, we kept secrets from Wanda and that didn't turn out so well." They all shifted uncomfortably at memories of Wanda discovering Doc's botched surgery to remove Souls. Melanie couldn't think of anything to say in response so they all lapsed into an uneasy silence. Kyle had a distant expression on his face, recalling his own memories of dealing with Wanda in the beginning. At length Kyle shook himself from his own reverie and said, "I'll see how Sunny's doing."

As Kyle walked off Jared shook his head slowly and said with an edge of disbelief in his voice, "I'm still trying to adjust to Kyle being a voice of reason around here."

"Ah, change is good," replied Jeb with a grin as he watched Kyle head down a side passage. "If a man like Kyle can grow some sense, it speaks volumes to the potential of the human race." He turned back to Jared and asked, "You'll be leaving soon?"
"As soon as the sun's down," answered Jared with nod.

Jeb nodded as well. "Well...I've got work around here to do." He turned to leave but then paused and looked both Melanie and Jared over, as if to memorize the couple in his memory. In a soft voice he said, "Be careful, be safe, and come home as soon as you can."

Jared made a small inclination of his head in agreement with the old man. But Melanie let go of Jared's hand and crossed the distance to her uncle. She embraced him tightly and whispered, "I will Uncle Jeb."

Jeb patted her lightly on her back and then whispered his own response to Melanie. "Makeup with Jamie before you go, don't leave angry. You'll regret it if you do."

Melanie forced down a resigned groan and merely shook her head in slight bemusement of her uncle's requests. "Alright, alright, I will."

After Jeb had left to oversee the planting in the north field Melanie walked over to where Jamie continued to work on watering the corn. Jared followed her but kept a distance to allow the two a certain amount of privacy. Brother and sister stood silent for a few moments. Melanie was about to speak when Jamie went first.

Still looking down as he poured water on the thirsty plants Jamie said, "You're going soon." It wasn't a question, just a statement of fact.

"Jamie," began Melanie but she then stopped herself. She didn't want to lecture or scold him again. Jamie was growing up, and this world they now lived in didn't allow the luxury of having an idyllic or lengthy childhood. "Jamie, baby, I'll miss you." Her voice becoming tight with emotion.

Half a second, that was all it took to have Jamie revert from a teenager to a little boy. He had dropped his bucket and embraced her tightly before Melanie knew what had happened. She smiled to herself as she hugged him back. She felt Jared come up behind her and then there was a third set of arms, encircling both siblings. They all held on to each other in a soft silence.

Melanie could feel when Jamie spoke, his head was in her shoulder. He was running through another of his growth spurts. Soon he'd be as tall as her. "$\text{Love you Mel, please come back.}$"

"I will Jamie," said Melanie, "$\text{I promise.}$"
"Well, another day, another dollar," said Seeker Owen as he completed his review of his report displayed on the monitor. He smiled to himself, the day was drawing to a close and he felt happy at his completed work. Turning in his chair, he took a moment to look out of his cubical office. The large square windows running the length of the office area permitted a beautiful view of the late afternoon in Washington DC.

From behind him in their shared office Seeker Grey Dawns shook his head slowly. "Honestly Owen, you say some of the strangest things." His voice held light amusement as he spoke to his friend. "You say things like that or 'A penny saved is a penny earned.' What is that supposed to mean?"

Owen turned in his chair to face his friend. Seeker Grey Dawns or at least Grey Dawns' body was broad-faced man with jet black hair neatly slicked back. While his face was plain and unremarkable, Grey Dawns had distinct sharp blue eyes. Eyes which had a talent for detail and spotting even the smallest of irregularities. A most useful trait for his calling. Like Owen, Grey's human host was a little on the short side compared to most Human hosts. A minor physical quirk, but the similarity had been the basis for the two to become good friends.

Owen shrugged with a faint embarrassed smile. "It's just a saying."

Leaning back in his chair, Grey considered Owen's comment. "It's a Human saying," remarked Grey at length, "about money." Owen couldn't quite tell from his friend's expression what he was thinking.

"It's meant to express the completion of the day's work," elaborated Owen.

"It sounds like the phrase means you're being paid for your work. But Owen," questioned Grey with a bemused look, "we're not paid. Money doesn't exist anymore."

A faint groan escaped Owen and after seeing his friend's perplexed look he leaned forward in his chair. Grey could be so formal and literal. Owen sometimes wondered if his friend ever relaxed. "You sound like a Spider, Grey. You're over thinking this. As usual."

"I was never a Spider and neither were you," replied Grey. Then with a touch of indignation that bordered on a grumble added, "And I am not overthinking this."

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Owen could help it, he sat back in his chair and laughed out loud. His easy going laugh attracted the attention from several of the neighboring cubicles. Owen held up his hands in a calming gesture as several of his nearby fellow Seekers looked at him and Grey oddly. "I do apologize for interrupting everyone. Please forgive me." He indicated Seeker Grey Dawns and added, "Grey said something funny."

Other Seekers in the office nodded and turned back to their work. From the cubicle across from Owen and Grey, Seeker Amber turned to the men and said, "Well there's a first time for everything." Looking at Grey, she asked, "Grey Dawns, what was your joke?"

Owen looked at his friend. Grey Dawns' broad face was growing red with embarrassment. Owen felt an immediate sense of shame. He had not meant to create discomfit for Grey. Owen's smile faded and he addressed Amber somberly. "No Amber Rains, Grey Dawns wasn't telling a joke. We were discussing a phrase I was using. I felt he was overthinking the comment and now I've
accidentally caused his humiliation by laughing."

"Owen," chided Amber softly, "you should apologize."

"I know," replied Owen as he hung his head. As Amber Rains returned to her work, Owen looked up a little sheepishly at Grey Dawns. "I'm sorry, that was rude. I didn't mean to laugh at you."

With a shake of his head, Grey Dawns said matter-of-factly, "You don't need to apologize Owen. You just find humor in odd things."

"True," reflected Owen. Drawing his chair a little closer to Grey Dawns he said in a quieter tone. "You know my Host was given to laughing and finding humor in many things in his life. Sometimes I think his sense of humor bleeds through into me."

Grey Dawns was silent for a while. When he finally did speak, his voice was low and cautionary. "Owen that's why I'm a little…concerned. Talking about money or your Human host effecting you could cause some to consider you to be unstable or," and he lowered his voice to a whisper, "not a Soul at all."

Owen's eyes widened in surprise and he quickly sucked in a breath at what Grey Dawns was implying. Seeing the expression on his friend's face, Grey quickly added, "I'm not saying you are, but others who don't know you as well as I might draw the wrong conclusion."

They both sat silent for a moment. Owen felt his former good mood begin to slip away. Owen thanked Grey Dawns for his advice and then turned back slowly to his computer. He could feel Grey Dawns' sharp eyes on him for a few seconds more and then heard Grey Dawns turn in his chair and return to his work. But Owen continued to stare at his screen, lost in thought.

'Not a Soul,' thought Owen as he pondered his friend's words and suppressed a shudder. Only a few months ago the idea there could be Souls, let alone Seekers, who could be actual disguised wild Humans was laughable. No, not just laughable, utterly absurd. But the last few months had seen the impossible happen with frightening regularity. First the disease, immune to all their medicine, had come to the city of Chicago and destroyed thousands of lives. Then scarily a month later the same city was under attack. A starship had been blown up as it left the city, many of the Souls on board lost. All these actions initiated by a group of Humans hiding in the city.

The savage humans had even managed to infiltrate the Seekers' headquarters in Chicago. These false Seekers had proceeded to murder their comrades in the chaos created by starship's destruction. The method used by the infiltrating Humans was not a superficial disguise like contact lenses. Such a simple masquerade would have never fooled the Seekers. No, these monstrous Humans had a much more grisly technique. Owen had not heard all the horrific details, but these poor Souls were…mutilated. Each of their silvery bodies cut, cauterized and weakened until the host Human recovered and regained control. They would look just like a Soul, the same beautiful gleaming silver in their eyes, but with a cruel and vicious alien mind in control.

Giving up just staring at his computer monitor, Seeker Owen turned back to Grey Dawns. His friend was busy with tabulating possible Human sightings. It was an essential job as the Seekers would use the most credible sightings to launch more comprehensive investigations. Working worldwide since the attacks Seekers had redoubled their efforts to track down these rogue Humans. However, their efforts so far had not produced much success.

Feeling his previous good mood was gone for good, Owen spoke to Grey Dawns in a hushed tone. "Did you hear about Seeker Samuelsson in New York city?"
Grey Dawns looked up from his work with a small frown. "Who in New York city?"

Owen explained. "Samuelsson worked at the Seekers' New York division for the last two years and he vanished a week ago. No sign of him can be found."

"That is most unfortunate," replied Grey Dawns. He cocked his head to the side while his small, confused frown remained. "But Owen, why are you bringing this up?"

"He disappeared right before the Healers tested the city's Seekers for any insertion anomalies," said Owen. Since Chicago, Seekers had been testing to see if any other false Seekers remained hidden in their ranks.

His frown deepening, Grey Dawns asked, "We think this Seeker Samuelsson was an imposter?"

"No one has said that, just seems strange…doesn't it?" said Owen.

Grey Dawns paused in thought, but before he could answer Seeker Amber Rains from across the way spoke up softly. "I heard that two Seekers went missing right before the tests in Florida." Self-consciously she shrugged her shoulders when both men turned to face her. "Sorry to listen in, but everyone is talking about it."

Still frowning Grey Dawns said, "We don't know all the facts. For all we know, these Seekers were sent on special assignment."

"Maybe," said Amber, "but the two I heard about were apparently partnered. When their shared apartment was examined, several very unusual communication devices were found."

"I hadn't heard anything about this event," remarked Owen, surprised at the lack of official communication. "What type of communications gear?" But Seeker Amber shook her head, not knowing the details. Owen asked both his colleges, "Why so much secrecy on these events?"

"I believe there is still concern there are other fake Seekers in our origination. Information is being restricted until we can be sure all infiltrations have been removed," clarified Amber.

Grey Dawns' grimace lightened to a soft smile. "All Seekers in the Washington DC bureau have been checked by Healers. We are all who we say we are. There is no need for deception or secrecy. This is just rumor and gossip."

"Perhaps," replied Amber. "But maybe the issue is not with barbarous Humans and what they have done with our precious Souls brethren. Maybe some of us are willing participants in the Humans' trickery."

"Impossible," snorted Grey Dawns. "Why would any Soul willing help a Human?"

"Well," began Amber and paused to consider her response. She tapped a finger to her chin as she thought about her theory. "Perhaps not willing, there have been cases of Human hosts influencing us. Remember I was on that Arizona case a few years ago. That poor Soul was obviously influenced by her host."

While Grey Dawns and Amber Rains continued quietly discussing the possibilities of host influences, Owen found himself withdrawing from the conversation and becoming contemplative. He wondered about himself and his own host body – Owen Mitchell. He had never felt like his mind or body wasn't his own. True, the host's body and memories could carry over some influence, which was normal. Owen the Human had liked jokes and finding humor in his life. Was that such a bad thing to have an affect on you?
Owen had originally come from the Dragon world. His name there was a very long and unpronounceable name in the Human languages, so he had decided to adopt his host's name. He had felt it was somewhat appropriate. Owen Mitchell had been an FBI agent. The Human's calling was not unlike his own. The agency of the FBI provided law and order in the Humans' society and so did the Seekers in the Souls'. Many other Souls took their Human host names as well. But that didn't mean they were being influenced by their hosts, did it?

"Your attention, please."

Seeker Owen started, surprised by the crisp new voice which sounded from the far end of the floor. Amber and Grey stopped their conversation, also startled. In nearby cubicles, heads were popping up to identify the new speaker. Rising up with Grey, Owen followed their gaze to the source of the voice. Two figures stood near the entrance to their shared office suite. One was a tall older man with midnight colored skin. The other was small and rather young. A petite woman with a pixie cut of straw-colored hair.

"That's Seeker Jade in the Hollows," said Amber Rains in amazement as she stared at the young blond-haired woman.

"I thought she was in Europe," said an equally awed Grey Dawns.

Seeker Jade in the Hollows moved from the entrance and down the central aisle dividing the rows of cubical rooms. Her small face held a bright smile as she slowly surveyed the standing Seekers. Coming to a stop at the midway point of the hallway, she spoke in a light peaceful voice. "I do apologize for interrupting at the end of the day. But I and Healer Dry Stones," and she stopped to indicated the lanky dark skinned man who remained at the beginning of the walls forming the cubical offices, "need your cooperation."

A Seeker, Owen couldn't see for sure who it was, standing farther down the row of workspaces said softly, "Seeker Jade, I'm pleased to meet you. What do you need of us?"

"We need all of you to come with me. We will be performing a simple medical test on your host bodies," replied Jade in the Hollows in the same pleasant, happy tone.

"What tests?" asked Grey Dawns.

From where he remained standing Healer Dry Stones spoke up in response. "It's a routine inspection of your host bodies." His voice growing slightly rough he added, "For anything unusual."

Turning about in the office space, Jade asked sweetly, "That will not be a problem for anyone?"

"Of course not," said several Seekers in unison. Jade's host body nodded happily at their answer. Around the office, Seekers made ready to leave and follow Jade and Dry Stones. Owen dropped to his chair and proceeded to close out his workstation. He wondered just what tests were going to do. Grey Dawns also sat down and began to work away on his computer.

From his desk, Owen heard Amber Rains say, "Wow, Seeker Jade. She's been on what…five different worlds?"

"Six worlds, I believe," replied Owen as he finished shutting down his computer.

"And from Origin to boot," said Amber as she came out of her cubical office. She adjusted her dark uniform, seemingly wanting to look her best for the prestigious Seeker and quickly followed after the other office staff.
Standing up Owen moved to follow when he noticed Grey Dawns had not shutdown his computer. His friend remained sitting while typing rapidly on his keyboard, his eyes tightly focused on the monitor.

"Coming Grey Dawns?" asked Owen.

Not looking up from his work, Grey Dawns said in a low voice, "Sorry Owen, I've got one task to finish and then I'll go. You go on ahead, I'll join you in a minute."

"Oh, it's not a problem. I'll wait," replied Owen as he sat back down in his chair.

Grey Dawns stopped his work for a moment. His face and body went very still. After a few seconds he began working again and replied, "Suit yourself."

Owen waited for a minute and then for another. By now the entire office floor was empty and quiet. The only sound coming from Grey Dawns station. Owen was about to ask Grey Dawns just what he was working on that was so important when the man finished typing. With a long slow sigh, he said simply, "It is done."

"What's done?" asked Owen, but was interrupted by a buzzing noise coming from Grey Dawns' computer. On his screen a red flashing warning box had popped up. It flashed the same notification message over and over.

Confused and a little concerned over Grey Dawns' behavior, Owen leaned forward to examine the error on the screen. The warning message held the text - 'Unauthorized Access – Station Locked'. It was a security lockout message. Turning to Grey Dawns, he asked with growing alarm, "What did you do?"

But instead of answering, Grey Dawns stood up and strolled slowly over to the bank of windows looking out to the city. In the distance the rising tower of the Washington Monument could be seen. Leaning against the glass window Grey Dawns face grew sad, in fact, incredibly sorrowful, his whole body filling with grief. A slow trickle of tears ran down his face as he stood looking out the window.

Owen had never seen his friend act like this. Grey Dawns was always professional and well in control of his body's emotions. But not now, he was stricken by some deep pain. "Grey Dawns..." said Owen, growing from worried to distraught at his friend's apparent emotional breakdown.

"You know," began Grey Dawns in a weak and cracked voice, "when I was a kid my parents brought me to D.C. for the first time. I wanted to see everything, dragged them to every museum and tourist attraction available. I miss them..."

"What!?" asked Seeker Owen in complete confusion.

Turning back to him, Grey Dawns wiped away the few tears on his face. He didn't bother with his eyes and they remained watery, still filled with a deep grief. Owen and Grey Dawns stared at each other for long seconds, neither of them moving a muscle. Finally, Grey Dawns said with a slight shake of his head, "Enough tears." Then he laughed, in a way that was so foreign to Owen. "Or... maybe there can never be enough tears."

Owen blinked, a deep-seated fear was growing in him. "Grey Dawns, I need you to explain yourself."

But 'Grey Dawns' didn't appear to be listening. He pushed himself away from the window and began to speak. "Faked my first test...But I guess someone wasn't convinced. Or maybe the
Seekers are just getting paranoid. They're not always the swiftest to catch on, but when they do…"
Owen wasn't sure the man's speech was meant for him or if he was just talking out loud.

Intellectually Owen understood what was happening. Recognized that 'Grey Dawns' was an
imposter, that there was a real possibility Owen had never met the true Grey Dawns. But Owens'
emotions for his friend, whether they came from his host body or were all his own, prevented him
from truly realizing the Human who stood before him.

"Who are you?" whispered Owen.

"Does it matter?" asked the Human. "This will be all over soon. They'll be here any second." And
Owen did hear the sound of someone, indeed the sounds of many people running down the
hallway connecting to the office. But he remained frozen, unable to move.

"You know Owen," said the Human, "I was prepared for just about anything when I came here. I'd
have to live and work among you…things. Had to hide myself completely, not the easiest thing to
do. Didn't expect…"

At the opening to the office floor, Seeker Jade and several others Seeker ran in. They quickly
scanned the surrounding cubicles and then took sight of the two men. Seeker Jade's voice, shrill
with urgency, reached Owen, "Stop Him! Stop him at once!" Owen forced himself to move
forward, his feet seemed to be weighed down by unseen weights, he moved so slowly. The Human
smiled at the advancing Seekers and then without warning his whole body staggered. Abruptly
Owen found his near paralysis gone and he caught the body as it slumped to the floor.

"Owen," gasped out the Human. His broad face was twisted in pain and saliva foamed at the edge
of his mouth. Owen gripped the body tightly and then slowly and clumsily lowered both of them to
the floor. He sniffed a bitter smell on the man's breath…cyanide. The Human swallowed and tried
again. "Never thought…I wound becomes friends with one…of you."

His whole mind had grown numb with shock and Owen could only force out only the simplest of
words. "Don't die," he cried. The others had reached them and there were calls to bring the Healers
at once. Seeker Jade in the Hollows commanded for the affected locked computer to be isolated.
Bodies swarmed around Owen and he just continued to cradle his friend's head in his lap.

"Owen," croaked the Human in a very faint voice.

Seeker Jade dropped down on her knees by Owen and the fallen Human. "Who are you?" she
demanded.

But the Human's eyes focused only on Owen and Owen realized there was still the sheen of silver
in those eyes. Then the Humans mouth moved weakly. "For what…its worth…I'm sorry…" His
voice trailed off and the light in his eyes began to fade. The body took one last gasp of air and the
Human spoke his last words ever. "What's coming will…kill you all."
"Come on! You've got to meet us half way," said Scott Alderman. He punctuated his statement with an exasperated sigh as he pushed away from the table and leaned back in his chair.

Sensing the Human's frustration, Healer Long Rivers tried his best to maintain a calming demeanor. He smiled and clasped his hands together in what he hoped would be a friendly, if not pleading gesture. Humans could be very stressful for a Soul like him. His people were always kind, soft spoken, and worked efficiently together. Humans, on the other hand, were loud, less than cordial, and argumentative in general – and this was when they were 'friendly'.

Starting his words as gently as possible, Long Rivers responded, "I believe I see your point, Scott. But isn't better if we apply rules to each race's specific issues and needs?"

Scott was shaking his head before Long Rivers had even finished. "No, No, you need to take a long view on this problem."

"I believe I am…" began Long Rivers when Scott made a face. His jaw had locked and his teeth were clenched, his face starting to darken in anger. Long Rivers gulped and the rest of his words died in his throat.

Marc Walters watched as Long Rivers and Educator Dry Sands on the Plain stiffened. He could feel the young woman's posture going ridged at Scott's growing anger. Only Wanda, sitting at the end of the dining table, didn't react to Scott's anger. She had spent more time with Humans and was far more used to their volatile nature. Seeing his friend's frustrations was getting the better of him and frightening the Souls in the room, Marc laid a hand on Scott's shoulder. He didn't say a word to Scott merely a shake of his head.

"Look," said Scott after he took a moment to calm down. "What you are saying is there will be two sets of laws. One for Humans and one for Souls. Please trust me, in our history it has never worked out well for a society when such a system is in place. No matter how much you try, it creates a divisive separation in society. Which leads to resentment or envy between the two groups and then right on to segregation. If we really want to have co-existence between Souls and Humans, everyone must be equal before a common set of laws."

Dry Sands spoke up. Her face had grown confused at Scott's little speech. "But Scott, your history is full of examples of those who could freely flaunt your laws when it suited them. How can we apply the same rules to our people if there will be some Humans who willfully ignore the law?"

Scott stared at her with a deepening frown. "Alright, you need to back that statement up and explain," he said after trying and failing to make sense of her comment.

Marc scrutinized Dry Sands. She still had the same skinny librarian look the first time Marc had met her, minus the horn-rimmed glasses he pictured all librarians wearing. Marc guessed Dry Sands' body was still pretty young, maybe only twenty years old, but he was pretty sure that Dry Sands the Soul was quite old. The Soul woman could be very shy, sometimes saying less than five words in one of their secret meetings. But he had learned when she did speak, she could be a fierce advocate for or against you. He had a feeling Scott was about to receive the latter.
Straightening in her chair, Dry Sands began. "Your justice system often allowed for the rich and powerful to secure better representation than your poor. Those with better legal defense would escape punishment for their crimes. Or in some cases the influential simply 'bought' the verdict they desired. How can you claim all were equal before the law when such abuses regularly occurred?"

Hoping to defuse the still tense atmosphere in the room, Marc let a small grin form on his face. Smiling at Dry Sands, he said, "Point for Dry Sands, got a solid rebuttal, Scott?" He was watching Scott and missed the blush which formed on the young woman's face.

"Ughhh," groaned Scott. Shooting an irritated look at Marc he grumbled, "You're not helping." Turning back to Dry Sands, he attempted to defend his argument. "Yeah, I'll admit things like that happened, but it didn't occur all the time. Plenty of people, rich or poor, influential or not were given fair treatment in our justice system." Scott paused as a thought came to him. Solicitously he continued, "Just because our justice system wasn't perfect doesn't mean it doesn't work. You don't give up and drop it because mistakes are made. You just have to work harder at fixing the flaws."

After weeks of meetings between the band of Humans and the small group of rebel Souls, both sides were still struggling to reach common ground on how to achieve a lasting peace between the two races. Both sides had a multitude of problems to overcome before they would even be close to a workable solution. There was an obvious one, how to deal with the Seekers. The Souls tasked with hunting Humans and protecting their own kind were becoming increasingly paranoid and suspicious. But too often the Souls were troubled by the more mundane problems the Humans raised. Issues of humanity's rights, obligations, and opportunities in a shared world of Humans and Souls were causing the aliens no end of problems. It was becoming apparent to Marc and the other Humans that while the Souls were willing to entertain the idea of living side-by-side with Humans, they had no real idea how to. Always in their past they had completely assimilated a race they encountered. Occupying the bodies of an entire race was co-existing in their minds. To freely allow the host race to continue had been unthinkable to the aliens until they meet Humans.

"Perhaps," began Wanda as she straightened in her chair, "we should table this particular issue for later. We've made more progress in handling human representation in our Quorums."

"Sounds good to me," replied Marc. He paused as he felt his stomach rumble. A quick check at his watch told him it was approaching noon. He had other places to be and wanted to get moving. Glancing back to Wanda, he added, "How about we break for lunch and pick this up afterwards?"

"Yes!" replied Wanda enthusiastically. "We've all worked hard today, best to take a break." They were quick nods from around their table.

"Finally," said Scott with a tired sigh, "something we can all agree on."

There were nods from around the table and the previous tension in the room began to fade. Wanda got up from her chair and padded over to the adjoining room that contained their small kitchen. Marc reflected that Wanda was doing well in her new home. She had quickly adapted to his little family. He had been surprised when the visiting Soul had elected to stay in Chicago and work to find a lasting peace. It would be a dangerous to remain in the city full of Souls and his first impression of Wanda was she would be too fragile and weak to endure such difficulties. But Wanda had proved him very wrong, she had risen to the challenge and he found himself increasing relying on the little Soul to help guide their meetings.

Wanda gestured to Scott and Long Rivers to join her in the kitchen. The Human and the Soul exchanged wary glances but followed the little woman's request. Wanda put them to work while she pulled various items out of the refrigerator. Soon the three of them worked together to prepare sandwiches. Marc had to smile to himself, Wanda was working her magic. She was quite literally
getting the two opponents to break bread.

Noting the time Marc realized he really needed to get going. He gathered his notebook and was beginning to rise when he noticed Dry Sands had moved her seat closer to his. She glanced at him and then at the doorway. Shyly she asked, "Marc, are you leaving?"

"Got sort of a working lunch meeting downstairs," replied Marc as he stood up.

"Oh," replied the Soul woman and then look down at the empty dining room table. She looked as though she wanted to say something but then thought better of it.

"Don't worry," said Marc with a smile as he exited the room. "I'll be back before we start."

Leaving the dining room slash conference room, Marc moved briskly down narrow hallway of the Hotel Rose. There he found Paul, Mike, and Ian working on pulling up the old threadbare carpet on the hotel's floor. Giving himself a bit of a running start Marc nimbly leaped over the working men. Ian gave a surprised shout and Mike shot him an irritated glare as he landed on the far side of the men. Not slowing down he called over his shoulder, "Ian, your girlfriend is making lunch, you guys should get in on that." Any annoyances with him vanished as the men dropped their work and headed off to find Wanda and the promise of food.

Marc had been spending a great deal of time meeting with the Souls and truthfully he had a great deal of other much more mundane issues to worry about than trying to figure out interstellar relations. As usual it came down to securing food and supplies for his little family of thirty humans. A family which was very close to getting another member. Turning down the another passageway, he took sight of Kate Gonzales coming out of Mike's and Sarah's room. With her came their daughter Alexis, the little girl making quite a fuss.

"Mommie," squealed Alexis.

"Com'on runt," grumbled Kate as she led the little girl into the hallway. "Give your mom some peace for fifteen minutes."

"Alexis, go on with Auntie Kate," came Sarah's tired voice from the room.

"We've got lunch brewing," said Marc as he came to a stop beside Kate and Alexis.

"Perfect," replied Kate with a tired sigh. She turned down to Alexis and managed to put in some genuine cheer into her voice. "Let's go get food, Alexis."

Before she had even finished the little girl was already running as fast as her little legs would allow her down the hallway announcing, "Lunch…Lunch…Lunch!"

Marc laughed but stopped himself when he saw the dark look on Kate's face. "She been impossible today," snapped Kate as she indicated the receding Alexis.

Resisting to further anger Kate, he turned from the glowering young woman and stuck his head into the small room. The aged hotel room would be undersized for one person and for a family of three soon expecting another it was bursting at the seams. Attempting to fit on the bed half filled with clothes lay an exhausted Sarah.

"How are you doing?" asked Marc.

Sarah's eyes were closed and both hands were gently rubbing temples. Without opening her eyes, she turned towards Marc's voice. "Ready for this kid to be born."
Marc's eyes landed on Sarah's very pregnant belly. "He's kicking again?"

"And then some, think he wants out as much as me," replied Sarah as she moved her hands from her head to her stomach. Running her hands over her swollen midsection, she said in a tender whisper, "Easy there little boy. Give your mom a few minutes peace."

"I could get Mike if you want," said Marc distractedly as he watched Kate run after the escaping Alexis.

"No," came back Sarah's sleepy reply. "This tired mother just needs some alone time."

"Not a problem," agreed Marc. He didn't want to interrupt Sarah further and nor did he want to be late. Speaking softly, he said, "Get some sleep Sarah, you're going to need it." The expectant mother gave him a drowsy half reply as she drifted off to sleep.

Turning from the room Marc continued on his way, needing to hurry or he would be late. He descended the stairs to the next floor two at a time. Despite everything, Marc realized he was truly in a good mood today. He knew it came from his upcoming meeting. Hopefully, she would be surprised...And happy. For she didn't always take his surprises well.

The 'she' being Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. He found the Seeker standing in the hallway of the second floor of the hotel. She was studying the newly replaced door to a nearby room and didn't see his approach. Marc quashed down a childish urge to startle her. Instead he cleared his throat to get her attention and spoke softly. "Not bad, huh?"

Bright Moon's body shifted smoothly as she turned to face him. She glanced around the hallway with its freshly painted walls and brand new carpeting. At seeing him standing in the hall, a small smile formed on her lips. Nodding she said, "Yes, it's very nice. Your people have done an excellent job restoring this floor."

"Thanks," replied Marc with a mild shrug of his shoulders. Hesitantly he added, "It's nice to see you, Bright Moon."

She nodded and replied a little stiffly, "I'm pleased to see you as well, Marc."

Their relationship wasn't the easiest, reflected Marc. Even when you looked past the difficulties of their two different spices, they had little time to meet each other and even less occasion when they could be alone. It was important to make such moments count. Joining her they walked comfortably down the hallway. As they went he gestured to the above floor. "We're already pulling up stakes upstairs and starting to tear it down."

Stopping and looking up the ceiling, Bright Moon asked, "And you will move to the fourth floor?"

"Yep," answered Marc with a bob of his head. "We'll close off the fifth floor as we open this one."

Bright Moon grew thoughtful. "So you keep a buffer between your people and everyone else. Repairing one floor and then moving higher. What happens when you run out of floors?"

"I'm hoping we've pulled together some type of a peace agreement between Souls and Humans before we run out of places to hide in the hotel," explained Marc.

Giving Marc a weak smile Bright Moon pulled a small memory card from her pocket on her black dress pants. "Hopefully this will be helpful in those efforts."

Marc took the card and held it in his hand. Carefully studying it and then Bright Moon he asked,
"Did you have a problem getting it or smuggling it out of your headquarters?"

Bright Moon shook her head. "No, the data isn't something Seekers generally track. Few would think to look for Souls willing helping or hiding Humans. Our records deal mostly with reported sightings, unaccounted missing supplies, or other unusual activities that could signal humans."

"Well, Wanda seems to think there are more Souls like her out there," said Marc. He waved the tiny memory card around and added. "If we can track them down and make contact we're in a better position to make our case to the rest of the Souls."

"I suppose," replied Bright Moon noncommittally as they walked along. Marc noted her distress, none of this was easy for Bright Moon. She knew better than anyone how difficult it would be to convince her fellow Seekers to allow even a small number Humans to live. Her willingness to help his people put her in a very stressful position. Maintaining her job while feeding the rebels information had her lying and deceiving Souls on a daily basis. Regardless of what others thought, Marc knew Bright Moon did not enjoy lying. He hoped his little surprise might help her relax.

Coming to a stop at a closed door, Marc couldn't help but grin at Bright Moon. She frowned slightly, looking at him and then to the closed door. A little suspiciously she asked, "Marc, what are you doing?"

Putting his best 'I'm innocent' face on, Marc briskly turned the doorknob and swung open the closed door. With over-dramatic fanfare to the contents in the room, he bowed to her and announced, "Ta-da!"

Bright Moon's eyes widened in surprise as she took in the contents of the room. The room was small like all the other accommodations in the hotel. Most of the space taken up by two twin beds. But on the bed nearest the door lay an elaborate display of dishes, plates, and silverware. Steam climbed up from the bowls full of baked chicken, mash potatoes, and sautéed vegetables. Nearby sat a glass pitcher full of chilled water, condensation running down its length.

Taking this all in Bright Moon turned back to Marc, her mouth still agape in surprise. She blinked and then closed her mouth. "For me?" she asked in a small voice.

"Well, if you're famished you can have it all," replied Marc with a smile. "But I was hoping we could share it."

For a moment a beautiful smile broke on Bright Moon's face. Delight danced in her silver-rimmed eyes as she gazed at Marc and then back to his surprise meal. Then her smile fell as wave of misery passed over her face. Looking dejectedly down at the ground, she said quietly, "I can't stay."

Marc's own smile retreated and he asked with growing confusion, "Why not?"

"I was followed…" began Bright Moon.

Marc immediately tensed at her words. His voice going tight with alarm he shot back with almost a shout, "What!? Where are they?"

"No…No, not here," said Bright Moon in a rush. She brought her hands up and lightly touched Marc on his chest, trying to calm him. "The Seekers followed me as far as my apartment. They believe I'm still there eating my lunch." Managing a small smile as she added, "I gave them what you would call, 'the slip.'"

Still worried Marc fought down his earlier rising panic. "Why are you being followed? Do they suspect you or Nigel of aiding us?"
Bright Moon sat down at the edge of the bed with a weary sigh. "I'm being followed for my own protection," she explained. "Seekers around the world are now being routinely monitored when not working. Partly this comes from efforts to track down any counterfeit Seekers in the organization. But also there are fears that we could be captured and forcefully 'recruited' for the Facility. They don't know exactly how the Human host is recovered, so any deviant behavior is to be reported at once."

Marc joined her on the edge of the bed. His fading fears for his people's safety was quickly being replaced with concern for the Soul Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. "I didn't know it was that bad…"

Her eyes going distant, Bright Moon spoke softly but there was an edge to her words. "It's not well known to the general public, but the Facility infiltration was much more pronounced and elaborate than anyone would have guessed. Multiple Seekers from many cities have gone missing in the last few weeks. Apparently Agent Taylor was only one of many."

"I'm sorry," replied Marc automatically as he remembered the hate filled Agent Taylor who masquerading as Seeker Simple Sunlight had gleefully slaughtered her Seeker colleagues.

Bright Moon could only give him a sad smile. It would be easy for her to blame all humans for the activities of the mysterious Facility. But she realized how varied humanity could be and realized that Marc's people were blameless in these events. Not quite sure what to say Marc also looked down at the carpeted floor. The food behind them forgotten, their silence stretched on as they both sat gloomily at the end of the bed.

"I should apologize to you," spoke up Bright Moon. She turned to the still hot plates of food and inhaled the lovely mixed aromas of the cooked food. "You made me this meal," said Bright Moon as a bashful expression began on her face.

"I would never inflict my atrocious cooking skills on my worst enemy," proclaimed Marc. When she became puzzled he explained, "Dell cooked the meal."

"He did?" remarked Bright Moon in amazement. "He would do this for me?"

"Well…" started Marc as he considered his answer. He held up his hand and brought his thumb and index finger nearly together. "Might have been a little arm twisting on my part."

Bright Moon fidgeted on the bed, looking unsure of herself. "Marc, I don't want to cause…friction between you and your friend." Folding her hands in her lap, she continued, "I know most of your people don't care for me…"

"Hey," said Marc firmly as he cut her off. "Don't worry about me and Dell. Also anyone here who has a problem with you has a problem with me." Bright Moon remained sitting, staring at her hands with an unreadable expression on her face. Marc regarded her and then did the only thing he could think of doing. He reached out for her, his arm slipping around her waist. She was so lost in her thoughts she barely noticed. But then with a firm tug he pulled her to him and she let out a breathy gasp of astonishment.

He felt her body stiffen as he held her close. She looked at him and then to his arm around her for a long moment and then in a soft and sad voice said, "Marc, this doesn't fix anything. The Seekers still hunt for your people. The Humans of the Facility are still capable of who know what type of carnage." Her voice grew weak and uneven as she spoke. "And I…I am a Seeker…everything your people rightfully hate."

"Shhh…" he whispered into her ear and felt her body shiver at his gentle hushing. Speaking in a
warm whisper he told her, "Holding you isn't supposed to fix everything. Hell, it's not meant to fix anything. Just trying to comfort you." He felt her muscles in her body begin to relax. Gradually she leaned into him and let her head rest on his shoulder.

They sat in peaceful silence for long seconds. "This is nice," she said in a soft murmur. She turned her head on his shoulder and stared affectionately at him.

With a rough sound in his throat Marc said, "I do try," as he bent down and kissed her.

Chapter End Notes

I've been very busy with work so I've not been able to write much. I wanted to highlight some of the difficulties the two races would have when trying to build the framework of co-existence. Next chapter we learn what the people of the facility have been up to.

Read and review, thanks

-Walker.
"You will forgive me, Mr. Alderman," said Healer Long Rivers as he watched the other Humans on the floor gather for lunch. He had chosen not eat any of the food he had helped prepare, instead choosing to watch the others enjoy his efforts. "I know little of your people's history or your efforts of governing yourselves. I didn't mean to insult you or dismiss your recommendations."

"It's alright," replied Scott with a shrug. "I guess I was playing devil's advocate on handling laws." With a self-conscious smile he continued, "I'm hardly an expert."

"I am a Healer, I scarcely count as an expert either," replied Long Rivers.

Scott shook his head and said with gentle disagreement, "You're a part of your Souls' Quorum. That's your peoples' government. It should count for something."

"I fear our peoples' form of governance isn't up to the task of building a lasting co-existence with humanity," said the Healer with a sad expression on his face.

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary," stated Scott as he finished with his sandwich.

"Who said this?" asked Wanda after she carefully wiped her mouth with her napkin. She had been listening carefully to Scott's and Long River's exchange.

Next her, Ian leaned back in his chair and considered for a moment. "Thomas Jefferson?"

"Close," replied Scott, "It was James Madison."

"I'm not sure I know these men. Who are they?" asked Wanda.

She had asked Scott but before the young man could reply Dry Sands on the Plain spoke up, her voice barely above a whisper. "They were both influential leaders at the beginning of the nation state that would come to occupy this region of the continent."

"Fathers of our country," added Ian with a smile.

"My apologies," said Wanda looking a somewhat chagrin. "Neither Melanie or Pet had much interest in human history so I don't have many memories to draw on. Before I came to this world, I had only a basic overview of your peoples' history."

"I guess our history was a bit violent for you guys," mussed Scott.

Wanda managed to give Scott a weak smile but nodded her head yes. Across the table, Long River gave the same small gesture in agreement. Only Dry Sands on the Plain did not. Around the table eyes turned to the young woman, curious about her apparent knowledge of humanity's past. The attention of everyone made the Soul shrink down in her chair.

"It's alright Dry Sands," said Wanda with an encouraging smile.

The Soul woman looked meekly around at the gathered Humans and forced herself to straighten in her chair. "I've read some of your history books. Not in great detail, but I was interested in certain
events in your past."

"Like what?" asked Scott, genuinely curious what the alien Soul Dry Sands on the Plain would find interesting in human history books.

"I…I… was reading several works by different human writers. I didn't understand the context in some of the stories and went to investigate the historical periods," explained Dry Sands. She was beginning to turn very red in the face.

Seemingly unfazed by Dry Sand's discomfort Scott continued to press for details, "Which books?"

Now dropping her head, Dry Sands spoke almost imperceptibly. "Uhh…Gone with the Wind, Wuthering Heights. Umm…Several by Jane Austen." Her voice trailed off to be completely inaudible.

A puzzled expression came over Scott's face. The young man tried to make sense of the books the Soul had listed and her obvious discomfort at his questions. Still confused he turned towards Ian and Wanda with the hopes of understanding what he was missing. Although Wanda's face clearly showed she didn't understand her fellow Soul's unease, Ian's radiated sudden comprehension.

With wonder in his voice, Ian said, "Those are all romance novels, pretty famous ones, in fact." Ian paused as he considered the alien's reasons for reading such books. "You're studying human romance?"

"Really?" asked Wanda now interested as well. Dry Sands look up at Wanda, her face still cast in an embarrassed anxiety. At seeing how distressed Dry Sands was becoming Wanda immediately grew compassionate for her fellow Soul. "Please don't be upset Dry Sands," said Wanda kindly. "No one here is trying to humiliate you. They're just curious." Dry Sands look about the room, her eyes still filled with doubt. Wanda added helpfully, "We can talk later about it in private." This seemed to help relax the skinny brunet and she nodded meekly.

Wanda was still looking thoughtful, and after a moment of consideration she asked, "Perhaps I could borrow some of these books?"

Ian frowned at Wanda. "Why do you want to read those books?"

"You keep saying I should learn more about human history, that it will help me understand Humanity better," replied Wanda matter-of-factually.

Ian snorted. "Not going to learn much about anything from reading Jane Austen."

As more people drifted into the kitchen area to pick up food some stayed to listen to the discussion while others continued out into the hallway beyond. Scott and Ian began to discuss high school, swapping various stories about English teachers and some of the terribly boring book they had to read. Wanda enjoyed watching little Alexis barrel into the room, in search of food while Kate tried energetically to keep the girl in check.

Long Rivers watched all this in a quiet, reserved manner. This group of Humans wasn't much like his people, he reflected. If his people were here now, they would all be softly speaking, in neat, orderly lines as they went about getting food. Not the hectic disorder as Humans vied for food while the young Alexis tried to stuff an entire sandwich into mouth at once. And yet as Long Rivers watched he saw there was a genuine harmony among these people. As chaotic as the meal was, no one would go hungry and there would be little waste. Smiling to himself, Long Rivers decided as difficult as it was in finding a co-existence with Humans, it was worth the effort.
His eyes drifted to the doorway and then Long Rivers froze. Standing in the doorway was Annie Jansky with husband Simon. Upon seeing Healer Long Rivers in the room, Annie's body went stiff and her eyes widened in near panic. At seeing his wife's sudden and growing fear Simon quickly scanned the dining place for the source. His eyes settled on Long Rivers and they tightened ever so slightly in anger. Long Rivers felt a nervous strain rise in his body.

Others in the room started to see the silent exchange between the two Humans and Soul. Conversations quickly died away as Annie continued to stand ramrod stiff, her eyes full of fright. Simon's gaze began to turn from a weary stare to an outright scowl. Long Rivers began to sweat fearfully.

At last Simon broke the silence. "Com'on hon," said Simon as he took Annie's hand, "we'll come back later." He took her hand gently but had to pull on her to get the young woman to move.

There was a long silence after the two left down the hotels outside passageway. The Healer let out a long shaky sigh, his eyes still cast towards the doorway. It was Wanda who first spoke, her voice soft and gentle as she observed to Long Rivers. "You have not talked with Annie yet?"

"I see," said Wanda with a slight frown. She hesitated but then added reluctantly, "Perhaps you should go after her."

Healer Long Rivers gulped but then nodded at Wanda's informal request. As he stood, Wanda touched the bearded Healer on his arm. "I will go with you, perhaps I can ease any tension," she added helpfully.

"No, thank you, Wanderer," answered Long Rivers after a moment of consideration. "I have put this off for too long."

Several of the Humans blocked his way and Long Rivers could see they glanced over at Scott, looking to see if the man agreed to let him pursue the couple. Scott looked conflicted but then finally gave a small nod in agreement. The people quickly moved out of Long Rivers' path and with quick strides he was out the door.

Both Simon and Annie were not far down the hallway. Annie was leaning against the old stucco wall of the passageway while Simon was trying to calm her. Long Rivers did his best to slowly and calmly approach the couple. But Annie once again saw him and let out a nervous squeak and she hurriedly looked away. Simon was quick to turn around, his eyes narrowing and his expression growing hard at seeing the Healer.

"What do you want!?” growled Simon.

Long Rivers worked hard to keep his body from shaking. He succeeded with his body but not his voice. "P…P..Please may I speak with you…Annie?"

Simon reply was biting cold. "You want to have your little meetings here where you discuss how to share the world you stole from us, fine." The doctor jabbed an accusing finger towards the Soul and continued, "But I told Marc to leave us out of it. To leave my wife in peace."

"I just want to…have an opportunity to speak…” began Long Rivers.

"To what?" snapped Simon, angrily cutting off the Healer. Long Rivers began to retreat, his feet clumsily backpedaling. Frightened by the increasingly angry Simon.
"Simon," whispered Annie, "stop it. I'll talk to Long Rivers."

Simon whirled back around to Annie, his anger momentarily derailed. "You don't have to," he argued. There was a great deal of anguish in his voice.

Annie's eyes now turned from the floor up to the Soul. Her eyes held no anger or fear, just a quiet resignation. She looked back to Simon and squeezed his hand. "It's okay," she began as she turned back to Long Rivers. Taking a deep breath and letting it out she added, "I need to do this."

There was a long stare between Simon and his wife, which he had only gotten back a scarce three months ago. For the better part of four years, Annie had been the host for the Soul Crystal Spires. Only by trading the cure for the plague with the Souls had Simon gotten her back. He looked back down the hallway, everyone else had cleared out. Giving the three of them space to talk in private. Finally, he said, "Alright, go ahead then."

"Just the two of us," said Annie, again in a near whisper as her eyes never left Long Rivers. The Healer shifted uncomfortably under the slim woman's steady gaze. When Simon began to argue, she said simply, "He's a Healer, he can't hurt me."

"I very much disagree with that statement," replied Simon tightly. But Annie just shook her head and in the end Simon relented. Keeping his eyes on both his wife and Long Rivers he drifted down the corridor. "Annie, I'll be nearby, when you...need me."

And then Annie Jansky and Healer Long Rivers were entirely alone. For long seconds they both stared at each other. Letting out another tumultuous sigh, Annie shrugged. "Well, you wanted to talk Riv, what did you want to say?"

At hearing Crystal Spires's old nickname for him, Long Rivers felt his mouth form a smile. He quickly pushed the expression off his face. This wasn't the time for a jovial attitude. At one time Long Rivers had rehearsed what to say to Annie, making sense of his feelings. But now standing here before her, every single word was forgotten. He cleared his throat awkwardly and managed out a few words. "Annie, I wanted to say...I wanted to apologize for what I did to you."

Annie was silent for a few moments and then shook her head. "No," she replied in a weak and trembling voice, "don't just rush over it by saying 'what I did to you.'" Her voice grew firmer, "Say all of it. Out loud."

For the second time, Long Rivers felt his body quiver. Now he took his own steadying breath. He began again, "Annie Jansky, I am sorry I was the one who inserted the Soul Crystal Spires into you. That I'm responsible for your capture and the years you lost."

"Okay," said Annie faintly after another silent pause, "that's better." She closed her eyes and her face took on an expression of concentration. It was for a few seconds when they popped back open. She pushed herself away from the wall and approached Long Rivers.

Annie tapped her head with her hand and said, "You know what's messed up? I've got all these memories of you and her." She stopped in front of Long Rivers. Annie was shorter than him, the top of her head only coming to his chest. But as she stood there glaring up at him, Annie now seemed to tower over the Healer. He retreated from the Human. "So when I look at you I can't help but think – there's my friend Riv."

"I would be glad to be your friend," replied Long Rivers earnestly.

His pronouncement produced a deep scowl from Annie. "I'm not Crystal Spires, got it? I'm not your
friend. She's gone."

"I'm sorry," said Long Rivers automatically.

"I know," said Annie with agitated groan. "Everyone is sorry. Wanda's sorry, Dry Sands' sorry, you're sorry. Hell we've even got two Seekers who feel awful about the whole genocide. How many Humans are even left on the planet? And we still have to hide, desperately hoping we aren't found and completely erased."

"Please, Annie," begged Long Rivers, "I'm trying. I really am trying to make it better. I'm doing all in my power to save what remains of your people."

The scowl on Annie's face faded to be replaced by one of curious confusion. "That's what I don't get. Why are you helping us? You were never some great champion for rights of a host race. How many thousands of insertions did you oversee? Did you do yourself? As much as Humans despise the Seekers, the Healers were right there beside them. Annie's eyes closed and she shuddered as she continued, "Inserting your kind into children...disposing of those who weren't suitable..."

"I never did that!" exclaimed Long Rivers. Annie's eyes opened to see the Healer shaking his head fervently. "I never agreed with disposing of anyone. I don't support that philosophy."

"You inserted kids," retorted Annie and then her voice cracked, "...and babies." Tears pooled in her eyes and threatened to tumble down her face.

"I did," whispered Long Rivers. All of a sudden he felt very weak and weary, his body sagged against the wall. "I did the operations and never gave it a second thought. I was sure I was doing the right thing."

"Then why the change of heart?" asked Annie and she wiped away her tears.

"You aren't like the other races. You keep fighting...No matter what you keep fighting. Even against impossible odds your kind keep trying to push forward." Annie's brow came together in confusion, not understanding what the Healer was attempting to say. Long Rivers looked up to the cracked plaster ceiling of the hotel as he tried to find the right words.

"When I first met Marc, Scott, and Kate I made the mistake of bringing along a young Soul couple and their newborn child. They had wanted to see the Humans who had saved them and their child. I only saw this as a moment of joy, parents with their newly inserted baby. I was foolish, your people only saw it as destruction of the infant." Long Rivers paused and saw Annie nod her head in agreement.

"Marc was furious and I feared his wrath. I assumed the worse of him, that he'd strike me down, beat me in his rage." Long Rivers looked down to the ground, his expression hard to read. He continued, his voice growing softer, "But he didn't. He was still so angry, but he pushed his rage aside and continued to try to find a way forward."

Both they drifted off into silence, lost in their own thoughts. Breaking the stillness, Annie said absently, "Finding a way forward."

"I am trying," replied Long Rivers in a weary but determined tone.

The ghost of a smile formed on Annie's lips. "I guess...I can understand that...even appreciate your help."

Long Rivers felt a trace of a smile on his lips. His body felt like he had just run a mile. With an
effort, he pushed away from the wall. "Thank you, Annie."

There wasn't much else for the two being to say to each other. Long Rivers realized the two of them would never be friends, but they could at least be civil towards each other. A minor miracle in its own right given their past history. But before Annie left she had one last thing to say.

"Long Rivers," began Annie, "don't take what I'm going to say as me being vindictive or being said out of spite. Think of it as an observation from one species to another."

Perplexed the Healer asked, "What do you mean?"

Annie folded her arms around her and she looked very small and tired. In sad and resigned voice, she said, "What your kind does, all the races you've taken under this assumption you Souls know what best for everyone. It's not going to work forever. On some other planet, somewhere, you're going to try this," and she stuck out her arm and made a sweeping gesture to indicate the entirety of the Souls' invasion and occupation of Earth. "And it's going to fail."

Long Rivers contemplated Annie's warning. "Perhaps you are right. But we are very careful when we move to a new world. We would not easily fall into a trap."

"Doesn't matter," said Annie with a shake of her head. "Call it the law of averages or just some type of cosmic karma. You'll invade and it will go bad. The race, whoever they are, will hit back and I know your kind. You're not fighters, you're not up to a real protracted fight."

Now Annie's eyes were distant, perhaps in sadness or maybe even a little bit of fear as she finally finished. "And it will end in blood and death."

The midmorning sun shined down brightly on the Healing Center in Banning, California. The squat two-story San Gorgonio Memorial Hospital was neat and tidy, its glass and sandstone were utterly spotless. The word EMERGENCY written in big red letters on stone facade leading to the facilities entrance. Just outside these doors the Seeker patrol vehicle smoothly came to a stop.

Switching the ignition off on their patrol car, Seeker Rush ran a hand through his short bristly hair. Glancing over at his partner, he saw Seeker Madison was reviewing information off her small personal computer.

"Well," he said as he worked on his seatbelt, "that was a bit of a drive. But we're finally here."

"I don't mind," replied Madison, not looking up from her reports on her computer. "It's nice to get out of the city once in a while."

Reaching for the mic to the patrol car's radio Rush paused. With a mild shake of his head, he said, "I'm surprised you noticed, you've had your eyes on your computer the entire drive out here."

Turning back to the radio Rush began speaking into the mic in pleasant and calm voice, "Dispatch, this is Seeker Rush and Madison in Patrol Unit 6. We've reached the Healing Facility in Banning."

He made a quick scan of the nearly empty parking lot. "No sign of any activity. Has there been any further communication from the staff?"

There was a moment of static on the radio and then the voice of Seeker Wind Rider came over the speaker. "No. There was only the initial message of a problem, we've heard nothing since then."
Madison and Rush exchanged a glance. It was troubling the lack of communication, but not necessary worrisome. Rush again spoke into the mic, "Understood Dispatch, we'll investigate and maintain contact."

"Excellent. Hopefully this is just a miscommunication," came Wind Rider's mild response.

"I hope so," returned Rush as he sat the mic back into the holster. He worked to release his seat belt as Madison continued to review her computer's screen. He cleared his throat gently to get Madison's attention.

Madison blushed slightly, "Sorry," she said apologetically. "I'm just trying to keep up with the reports coming out of other cities," explained Madison as she worked to unbuckle herself and open her door with just one hand. She continued to scan over information on the small screen with the other. "Some of it is…disturbing."

"I know," said Rush with a nod of his head. There had been far too much troubling news in recent weeks. In effort to lighten the mood he added softly, "But so far none of it has touched the Los Angeles area."

"True," came Madison's response as she put her computer away. "But we must remain vigilant." Both Seekers nodded and pulled out their side arms. This was not something Seekers generally did unless there was confirmed threat. But with the ever-growing list of threats to the Seekers found in other parts of the country, neither Seeker was taking a chance.

Entering the building through the doorway beyond the red-lettered sign the Seekers found themselves in Emergency room lobby. There was no one in sight. A neat row of chairs sat in the waiting room, all of them empty, seemingly waiting to be used. The front desk sat unoccupied and vacant, only an office phone and a computer monitor on it. An oppressive silence filled the area.

"Hello?" called Seeker Madison. No response.

Walking over to the front desk, Seeker Rush examined the office phone. He tentatively picked the receiver up and held it to his ear. He listened for a second and then put it back down firmly. Shaking his head at Madison's inquisitive expression, he said, "No dial tone."

At the end of the room stood a double swing doorway which lead deeper into the hospital. Seeker Madison peered through the glass window in the door. The hallway beyond was lit up brightly by overhead lights, but there no one there. Again both Seekers exchanged trouble expressions, something was clearly wrong. Even if there was no one in need of a healer the front desk would always have been staffed.

"Alight," said Seeker Rush as he examined a small laminated map on one wall by the reception desk, "let's see if anyone is at the nursing station down the hallway." He took one more look around the empty lobby, it was so quiet. "If we don't find anyone we'll call in some backup."

Moving through the doors the entered the emergency wing of the Healing Center. On both sides of the hallway there were small rooms, each with an examination table. All of them empty. Seeker Rush again called out, announcing their arrival and asking if anyone needed help. Silence was his only answer. He looked over to Seeker Madison, she had a hand on her stomach and an unpleasant expression on her face.

"Madison?" asked Rush with worry in his voice. "What's wrong?"

Madison stopped and let out a pent-up sigh. "Does your host body ever…react to a situation when
you don't have enough information to judge it dangerous or not? But somehow it has sensed there is a danger?"

Rush's confused expression was the Seeker's only reply. Madison's face grew pensive and she added, "I think it's called intuition."

"I see," replied Rush as he glanced around the empty corridor. Still finding no one he turned back to Madison. "What does your body's intuition tell you?"

"That something is wrong here and we should call for reinforcements now," replied Madison.

"Agreed," said Rush with a firm nod of his head. He wasn't sure about his fellow Seeker's 'intuition' but there was certainly something amiss. Touching the small radio control clipped to his shoulder, he activated his communication with Seekers headquarters in downtown Los Angeles. Wind Rider or one of the other Seekers at the Dispatch Center should have answered, but soft static was the only response.

Madison tried hers as well, with the same results. Seeker Rush was beginning to feel an apprehensive stress build in his stomach. Rush's host body might not be able to sense 'intuition' but it most certainly knew fear and trepidation. He was about to tell Madison they needed to leave right away when a loud call came from the end of the hallway.

"Hello!" came the cheerful voice. Both Seekers spun around in alarm, Rush didn't raise his weapon, but his grip deftly tighten on the gun. Madison, on the other hand, brought her pistol up, her body going into an automatic defensive stance at the figure before them. A tall, well-built man with close-cropped hair stood near the doorway they had just come through. He had a full smile on his face as he stood watching the two Seekers. His happy expression didn't waver at all when he saw both Seekers welded guns.

"Oh my," said the man as he continued smiling at the two. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

Seeker Rush took a breath and took a second to calm his body, but he didn't relax his grip on his weapon. "Who are you?" he asked in a commanding voice.

The man cocked his head with an odd expression on his face. "Well, my name is Pale Light Gleaming. What's yours?"

"Pale Light Gleaming," said Seeker Madison slowly. "I am Seeker Madison and this is Seeker Rush. What is going on here? There was a report of a disturbance early this morning and then this facility went silent."

"Ah, I understand now," replied Pale Light Gleaming with a return of his broad smile. "I was a little concerned when I saw you had weapons." He clapped his hands together and approached the two. As he walked, Rush could see Pale Light Gleaming's bright blue eyes and their silvery reflection in the hallway's lights. Rush felt himself relax and nearby Madison lowered her weapon.

"You see," explained Pale Light Gleaming as he stopped in front of the Seekers, "one of the Healer's medical devices has been malfunctioning. It's producing a lot of EM radiation. I'm afraid I don't understand the machine very well. All the Healers are working to get it fixed."

"Is it dangerous?" asked Madison with a return of concern in her voice.

"Oh, no, not to us. Not us Humans," replied the man with his happy-go-lucky smile as he walked past the two Seekers and down the passageway. He stopped and looked back. "I mean it's not
harmful to our Human hosts." Rush and Madison exchanged slightly confused looks and then followed after the odd Soul.

Catching up with the man both Seekers listened as he continued to speak. "But it does play havoc with our phones and computers. Made it very difficult today for the Healers. Must be why your radios didn't work either."

"Are you a Healer?" asked Rush as he eyed Pale Light Gleaming. He wasn't wearing the typical Healer's scrubs, instead a simple black shirt with dark gray pants. It made Pale Light Gleaming almost look like a Seeker. "We were told there should be a Healer Many Leaves working here today."

"That's who I'm taking you to see," explained Pale Light Gleaming, not answering Rush's original question. He looked back at the two Seekers, his sunny smile dropping to a faint frown. "I'm so sorry that you had to come all this way. This has been such a terrible misunderstanding and I'm sure the Healer will be able to explain it all to your satisfaction." He looked down at noted the Seekers still had their weapons out. Giving them an apologetic smile, Pale Light Gleaming said softly, "Would mind putting your guns away? It will bother the Healers if they see you with them."

Madison still looked wary, but Rush put his gun back into its holster. While this Pale Light Gleaming might be a little eccentric, he had been nothing but friendly since they had met him. Seeker Rush felt tension begin to ebb from his body. Seeing her partner's trust, Madison shrugged and also returned her weapon to her holster. Pale Light Gleaming's smile was practically radiant.

"Right this way," he said gesturing to the right handed passageway that branched off from the main. They all walked down this hallway in a peaceful silence. Their walk was short as they quickly came to a small vestibule with several tables and chair. Two men waited for them, one sitting in a chair who wore the scrubs of Healer. His face was darkly tanned and his hair short and thinning. The other stood wearing a white coat with his arms crossed. In his sitting position, the man looked up immediately when the three came walking into the waiting area, but the other paid no attention to the new arrivals. It was difficult to read the standing man's expression as he wore a pair of reflective sunglasses on his face.

"Healer Many Leaves?" asked Rush as he stopped before the man.

The apparent Healer looked between the two Seekers and licked his lips. There was a sheen of perspiration on his face. He looked...frightened. Seeker Rush frowned as he looked at man sitting there anxiously. "Is something wrong?"

Now the man standing spoke. He still paid the Seekers little attention, his focus on the man who sat silently and sweating nervously before the Seekers. "Its alright Bob," he said in a calm and reassuring voice, "nobody expects you to get it right the first time."

"What are you..." began Seeker Madison when the one in the white coat suddenly moved. He lunged towards Madison, his arm twisting out from his body. There was something in his hand, a small gray cylinder. Before either Seeker could react, a puff of black smoke came from the canister. It was directed right at Madison's face.

Rush gasped in alarm as the cloud enveloped Madison's head. She coughed roughly twice and then her eyes rolled back. Her body hit the floor with a soft thud. There was a very short moment when no else moved, a pause in silence. Then there was an explosion of motion. Rush went for his weapon when Pale Light Gleaming hit him from behind. Pain shot up his lower back where he had been hit and Rush staggered from the blow. He twisted to face his attacker, his body automatically going to a protective stance, ready to defend himself.
But 'Pale Light Gleaming' moved expertly. He kicked out with his left foot and caught Rush in the knee. It forced the Seeker off his balance and his attacker pressed in and hit him hard in the stomach. The strike winded Rush and he fell back. Then the man in the white coat gripped him roughly, pulling his arm and forcing him down to the floor. Fear spiked through Seeker Rush as he saw the small cylinder in the man's hand sprayed out a black mist toward his face.

Rush readied himself to end his existence. He would not be taken as a hostage. The shadowy cloud smelled like sulfur as it enter his nose. His tiny true self, the silver being controlling the human body prepared to sever his host body's brain with its many whip-like tentacles. Then the dark gas leached into his body. The Soul felt an odd coldness take hold. Everything, every thought, every movement became…frozen. His attempt to end his life and his host's became the Soul's last thought as the darkness took him.

"You see," said the man in the white coat to Doctor Bob Richards, who up until this morning had been gone by the name of Healer Many Leaves. "How fast the CURE works," as he gestured to the two unconscious Seekers. Their bodies were still, but their eyelids flickered as their eyes underneath moved in rapid fashion. A side effect of their bodies' central nervous system being rewired and rewritten.

"Yes, I see," replied Doctor Richards with a shaky breath. His eyes never leaving the man and woman on the floor. Finally forcing himself to look away, Richards gazed back to the man in the white coat. He had given no name other than Director Smith. "Well then," said the Doctor as he rose up from his chair, "shall we start with the rest?"

"Right away," answered Smith.

Above the two fallen Seekers, Agent Craig Williams crouched down balanced on the balls of his feet. His broad smile was back on his face. Looking over the latest recruits, he said happily, "I can't wait for you to be part of the team."

Chapter End Notes

The part of the story between Annie and Long Rivers was originally going to be part of my second story, but I cut it because I couldn't find a good way to put it in. Hopefully this gives some depth to Long River and why hes motivated to help the humans.

The Facility is starting to make their move. We now see Paz's new cure at work. We'll soon see just what it can do. Of course Williams is back. I've worked out a pretty good story line for him. And if you thought Adams was a monster, wait till you see what Williams does.

As always read and review, I love the feed back.

-Walker.
"Owen, won't you please sit down," said Seeker Jade in the Hollows. Her light sweet voice followed her perfunctory gentle smile when she saw Seeker Owen standing timidly at her doorway. She was indicating a chair across from her desk. With a small nod of his head, Owen crossed the room and sat down in the offered seat. His chair was a simple one like the countless others found throughout the former FBI headquarters. But behind her neatly organized desk Jade sat in an ornamental high back chair. It's dark colored leather contrasted sharply with Jade's pale peach colored dress. Indeed given Jade's small body the giant chair she sat in seemed more like a throne than an actual piece of office furniture.

As Owen sat down Jade clasped her hands before her on the desk. Distractedly she brushed a few strands of her light blond hair from her face. She leaned ever so slightly forward, her blue-grey eyes intently watching the stout man. He sat with eyes downcast and his shoulders slumped, an air of depressed anxiety surrounding him. Jade couldn't help but feel a surge of pity for the distressed Seeker.

With the softest and gentlest voice she could provide for the poor man, she began, "Owen, how are you today?"

Owen looked up and managed a sad little smile, "I guess I am doing alright."

"You needn't present a brave face for my benefit," replied Jade with a small pout. "You've had a most traumatic experience. No one would blame you for being troubled."

With a heavy sigh, Owen's body wilted into the chair. His eyes cast downward, partly in pain, but also with a hint of shame. "Comforter Oasis has been very helpful," he mumbled out. "She's explained how I shouldn't blame myself for…Grey Dawns imposture's deception."

"And you shouldn't!" said Jade with a bright sunny smile. Owen managed to look up, at the sound of Jade's cheerful voice, from his dejected gaze at the office's carpeting. Jade continued when she saw Owen's attention turn to her. "Owen, these Humans are very deceitful and masters at manipulation. You shouldn't feel bad because you were fooled by one of them."

"I know. But I can't help but feel as a Seeker I should have realized who Grey Dawns actually was," replied Owen with a shake of his head.

"Well, that's very understandable," replied Jade as she leaned back in her oversized chair. "We Seekers pride ourselves on being watchful and on guard for any threats to our people. It's natural we would feel distressed if we failed in our calling."

Seeing Owen's face cloud in pain at her words, Jade quickly added, "But Owen, these are extraordinary circumstances. These…'Agents' the Human rebels are employing are something so unexpected. We simply have nothing in our past to prepare us for such…" And here Jade's upbeat smile faded and her voice grew sour, "…such atrocities."

Owen meekly nodded his head in agreement. He then opened his mouth to speak, but the question caught in his throat. Jade tilted her head in curiosity at Owen's unspoken words. "Please, Seeker Owen, feel free to speak your mind."
"Well...It's just I was wondering if we know when Seeker Grey Dawns was taken?" asked Owen. "When his host body regained...control."

Jade nodded her head, understanding Owen's need to know if he had ever interacted with the true Grey Dawns. "We can't be sure," admitted Jade. "But we believe he was captured during an assignment in upstate New York about a year and a half ago. He was out of contact for nearly two weeks. At the time, his lack of communication was blamed on poor weather. It was not long after this 'Grey Dawns' requested a transfer to the Washington D.C. precinct."

Owen digested this information slowly and said with a sad note in his voice, "Then I never met the real Soul. He was an imposture from the start."

Jade's answer was full of compassion for her colleague, "I'm afraid so."

Both Seekers grew silent, Owen lost in thoughts of his supposed friend while Jade looked over the single manila folder lying at the center of her desk. Pursing her lips, Jade spoke to Owen in a casual manner. "Owen, I've read your report on the incident and a full listing of all your activities with the Human Agent. But now that you've had some time to reflect and I wanted to ask you personally if there was anything you would like to add."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," replied a slightly confused Owen.

The diminutive woman leaned forward again in her large chair and her friendly smile dimmed on her small face. "Owen," said Jade plainly, "I must be completely honest with you. We are desperate to find out what these Humans are planning. We are confident they are preparing for a far larger strike than their attempts in Chicago. Any detail you can provide, no matter how small, on the Human who masqueraded as Seeker Grey Dawns will be very helpful."

"Of course Seeker Jade," replied Owen with a quick bob of his head. He shifted in the chair, leaning back as tried to make himself comfortable. "I've spent a lot of time remembering times we spent together. But there really isn't much to tell, the time we spent outside of work was usually getting a meal together or watching a movie."

"Did he ever speak to you about wild Humans? Anything at all?" asked Jade.

A slight smile appeared on Owen's face. "Grey Dawns always said our work was unpleasant and we should leave work at work. I can't remember ever speaking of about rebel Humans outside of the office."

"Owen, do not forget that this Human was spying on us the entire time. Using his position to send information to the rebels," replied Jade with a firm shake of her head. "The time he spent here was dedicated to undermining all our progress to help this world."

"Owen, do not forget that this Human was spying on us the entire time. Using his position to send information to the rebels," replied Jade with a firm shake of her head. "The time he spent here was dedicated to undermining all our progress to help this world."

"Umm...Yes, of course, Seeker," said Owen with an ashamed expression crossing his face. He shook his head with a tight face of consternation as if to dispel any lingering feelings for the spy. "Again Owen focused on his memories. "I remember once desiring to go to a local sporting event. But he didn't want to go, saying the game was now dull."

"What was the sport?" queried Jade as she began to write in her notebook.

"A basketball game I believe," answered Owen. "Thinking back, it did seem odd to say the game was now boring. I find the games to be of great excitement. But at the time I just figured the sport wasn't something Grey Dawns liked."
Jade put down her pen and considered Owen's statement. "To a Human the sport would be uninteresting. We modified the rules of the game to make it fair and enjoyable for all. They used to play the game for points, teams would either win or lose a game." Her little oval face made a small displeased frown at the idea. She continued, her speech taking on a scandalous quality, "Sometimes players would even get into fights with the other team," and Jade shuddered at the thought of violence.

Owen was aghast at Jade's statement, "I didn't know that." He then broke off and looked down at the floor, with a reluctant sigh Owen said, "But, this Human was never violent…to me or anyone else. He was…so sad in the end. I had never seen him cry before."

"Owen," replied Jade firmly and coolly, "As I've said these Humans are proficient liars and deceivers. I've had many first-hand experiences. We can't trust anything they say or do."

Hanging his head like a scolded schoolboy, Owen replied faintly, "Yes, of course, Seeker Jade. I've had little field experience and I know you are much more qualified to see the truth of the situation."

"Thank you," said Jade in a sweet voice as her smile returned to her innocent face. She steepled her fingers together and settled back in her chair. "Now Owen, you've had such a difficult time for the last few days, but you've not requested any time off. Don't you think it is good idea to get away for a little while?"

Nodding his head slowly, Owen looked back up to meet Jade's steady gaze. "Yes," he admitted, "I have thought about taking some time off. Comforter Oasis suggested this as well. But…I think I would like to remain working. My calling gives me purpose." A gradual look of resolve formed on Owen's face, his jaw going tight with determination. "I want to find these Humans, Seeker Jade. I want to find them and stop them from hurting anyone else."

Jade was silent as she scrutinized Owen. The Seeker remained unwavering but did divert his eyes from Jade's storm colored eyes. Finally, she replied to Owen's request. "Very well Seeker, please return to your work." Owen rose and headed for the doorway before he reached the door Jade added, "Owen if you do remember anything else, please contact me right away."

Owen turned back, his earlier distress replaced with a calm smile. "Yes, of course, Seeker Jade," he replied as he opened her office door and strode out into the hallway.

Returning to the file in front of her Jade continued to review Owen's report. She did not look up when Healer Dry Stones walked into her office and sat down silently in the chair Owen had only minutes ago been sitting. Glancing up from the information she was reading she allowed herself only the briefest of smiles at the lanky body of Dry Stones. "Your findings, Healer?" Jade asked as she went back to reading her document.

"No sign of any manipulation of Owen's host body. All eight hundred twenty-seven of his attachments are secured and optimally placed in his host's brain," answered Dry Stones smoothly. "The scans reveal no sign he or his host has been compromised in any way."

Jade put the papers back into the manila file and returned it to the neat pile on her desk. She pursed her lips as she considered her next question. "Is there any sign his host is resisting him? That his host may be influencing his thoughts or actions?"

Healer Dry Stones didn't immediately answer and Jade tapped lightly on her desk with hand as she waited for Dry Stones to answer. The Healer frowned and grew a bit uncomfortable at the miniature Seeker's unbroken stare. "Well…as you…know," began Dry Stones tentatively, "a resistant host is not always detectable. The Human brain is very complicated and the exact nature
of influence or resistance isn't completely understood."

With a humorless smile, Jade replied, "I have heard these explanations before. What I'm asking, Healer, is your best guess if Seeker Owen is trustworthy."

Dry Stones sighed, more than a little wearily. "Seeker Jade, typically I or a Comforter just ask a Soul if they are having trouble with a host. They, of course, would answer truthfully. Actually, in most cases the Soul will come to us if there was a problem. I have spoken with Seeker Owen and he assures me his host is subdued and not affecting him."

"But you see the flaw in this argument, don't you Healer?" asked Jade as she got out of her grand chair. She opened a drawer on her desk and fished out an ID and security pass card. Realizing where the Seeker intended to go, Dry Stones stood up as well. Jade collected her file and headed for the door. He pondered Jade's question as he followed her out the office.

As they walked down the hallway of the Seekers' Washington DC Operation Center, Dry Stones adjusted his larger stride so the smaller Seeker could keep up. He didn't need to work too hard at keeping a slow pace, the corridor was very busy. In recent weeks, activity in the building had reached levels not seen since the early days of the invasion. Walking along, Jade answered her own question, "An affected Soul could lie to us about being influenced. We must be careful about taking his statement at face value." She posed another question as they turned into the elevator alcove. "If Owen is lying to us about his host, how exactly would we know?"

"There would be visible signs," answered Dry Stones stiffly, uncomfortable with the topic. "His host would respond negatively when around us. Owen would attempt to find other free Humans, and distance himself from civilization."

"Would he?" asked Jade with a tight smile. She pointed to the file in hand, indicating the imposture Grey Dawns. "We've just seen how well the Humans can blend in with us. We put ourselves at risk if we assume we know what the Humans can or are willing to do."

Feeling chastised, Healer Dry Stones nodded his head humbly in acceptance of Jade's confidences in her own theories. He stood silently as Jade inserted the security card into a slot near one of the alcove's elevators. A light came on above the groove and Jade pulled the card back out quickly. The elevator's door nearest them slowly rumbled open. They both entered the waiting empty cab. There were no buttons indicating floors, only a small keypad on the right side of the doors.

As the doors closed and Jade began to enter a series of numbers into the keypad, Dry Stone spoke up. "What then, would you like me to do with Seeker Owen?"

Finishing entering her security code, Jade turned to the taller Healer. Her smile was agreeable and friendly as she looked up at him. "Healer Dry Stones," she answered pleasantly, "You've done everything you need to. I will make sure Owen is monitored at all times." She patted him lightly on the arm, "You needn't worry further."

Healer Dry Stones bowed his head once and then straightened as the elevator began to move downward. "As you wish, Seeker."

They remained silent as the elevator descended deep into the ground. At length, the cab slowed and then stopped. As the doors slowly began to open, Dry Stones cleared his throat and asked a little hoarsely, "I assume you wish me to monitor the prisoner."

"Please," responded Jade. Her voice still polite and soft, but her smile gone completely from her face. She started out the elevator, but Dry Stones didn't move. It seemed his legs had fused with
the floor of the cab and he couldn't move. Jade stopped herself and looked back at the stuck Healer. Her face remained neutral and she simply, "I know this is difficult for you to do, Healer. But this is important."

"Yes," replied the Healer as he slowly fell in behind the pixie-like blond Seeker. They entered a brightly lit corridor with white walls, ceiling, and floor. Other than the elevator door there was only one other door in the entire length of the empty hallway. Both Jade and Dry Stones headed towards the single door. "In truth, Seeker Jade, you have the much more difficult job. I feel great pain that you must endure this task."

A very slight smile formed on Jade's face at the Healer's words. Coming to a stop before the thick steel door Jade's face became a mask, devoid of showing any emotion at all, preparing herself for the unpleasantness ahead. She once again produced her security card and ran it through the slot near the door. As the door's locks automatically unsealed, she returned the card to her pocket. Pulling on the handle, she swung the door wide and looked into the room beyond and its sole occupant.

In the prison cell, the youthful face of the Agent Steve Anderson looked up at the two Souls and smiled.
tube from his pants' pocket. He seized Bending Reeds' arm and pulled him towards the canister. A dark cloud of mist jetted out and caught the young man right in the face.

The three Seekers at the table froze in shock at Rush's assault on Bending Reeds. All of their eyes locked on to Bending Reeds' body as it collapsed heavily to the floor. But before any of them could rally a respond, Madison tossed a small round object onto the table. It bounced once on the table and came to rest on a plate of food. With a loud bang, a pulse of black smoke erupted from the gas grenade. Two of the Seekers gasped and coughed as the dark cloud entered their lungs. Within seconds, their eyes rolled back and they slumped in their seats.

Only Seeker Gabriela had managed to react in time. She wrapped her hands around her mouth and covered nose as the dark sooty cloud enveloped her. But Madison quickly shoved into the booth, pushing one of the unconscious Seekers aside. Gabriela's eyes were wide with fright as she desperately tried to pull away, but was trapped by the other Seeker's unmoving body.

"Don't fight it," growled Madison as she gripped Gabriela's arm and began to twist, attempting to dislodge Gabriela's hand covering her mouth. Terror ripped through the trapped Seeker as Madison dug in and pried the protective hand away from the Seeker's nose. The black mist still lazily drifting in the air seemed to almost sense the uncovered opening and dove in towards Gabriela. The Seeker twitched a few times as she inhaled and then went still.

Madison Brinsfield sucked in a tremulous breath as she felt for a pulse on the unmoving Gabriela. But then she smile and let out a shaky sigh. She turned to her companion, who during her fight with the Seeker, had rushed to lock the front door. "That was close, Joe. I think she was about to kill herself."

Joe Tanner turned the sign on restaurant's front door from 'Open' to 'Close'. "Yeah, that was the last thing mine tried," he replied as his right hand almost subconsciously rubbed the back of the neck where a small pink line was etched into his skin. He let out his own nervous sigh as he stared out the window to the tall buildings beyond. "How are we going to do this for an entire city?"

As if in answer, Agent Williams pushed the door to the back room open and stood in the doorway. Behind him two gray haired people, a man, and a woman, laid sprawled on the kitchen floor. Williams surveyed the unconscious Seekers. Turning to the new recruits he said with a smile, "Same way the parasites did it, Joe. One at a time. Just one person at a time."

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"Well, if it isn't my Angel," said Anderson as he watched Seeker Jade and Healer Dry Stone move into his cell. He was laying on the cell's floor, but as Jade walked into the room he pushed himself up into a half-sitting position.

Jade's jaw clamped down hard at the leering grin Anderson aimed at her. She would not allow her body to betray any emotion to this odious being. Jade recalled the first time she had questioned the prisoner. He had screamed obscenities at her and then made lewd suggestions about what he could do to her body. Saying this while glaring hatefully at her with his eyes. Eyes that shimmered with the silver of a Soul, eyes that should have been peaceful and kind, not angry and vicious. It had taken all of Jade's strength that first day not to go running from the room.

Since his capture in Chicago almost two months ago, Agent Steve Anderson had been held in the in the small prison cell deep under the Seeker's headquarters. Only a select few knew of the man existence. He had been thoroughly examined, the Healers tasked with finding out how these
Human 'Agents' had regained control. What they found left them utterly horrified. The attached Soul had been systematically lobotomized. Where the Soul's antenna linking it to the Human's nervous system were cauterized and sealed off. And their most painful discovery left one investigating Healer so severely traumatized he had to be transferred off world. For many of the attached Soul's spare silver, thread-like appendages had been fused to Anderson's brain stem. Any attempt at removing and treating the crippled Soul would result in both the Human and Soul dying.

All of this spun through Jade's mind as she stood over Anderson. The room was completely bare, with the exception of the manacles that shackled Anderson's arms and legs to the wall. It left the Human with only a few feet he could move. Beyond taking him once a day to the bathroom, the Human was always in this cell. She knew she had nothing to fear from this Human, but still every time she came here her heart would beat fiercely in her chest. Afterward, no matter how successful she had been with her integration, she would feel weak and exhausted.

"You," she began softly, "will address me as Seeker Jade."

Anderson's disturbing grin didn't shift one bit. "Whatever you say, Angel."

Jade ignored his deliberate insubordinate attitude. She would deal with that aspect of the prisoner soon enough. Letting a sunny smile form on her small face she said, "I wanted you to know that we captured one of your friends. He was going by the name 'Grey Dawns' but perhaps you know him better as Carl Jenner." It was a lie, but Jade knew her deception was for the greater good. She delivered the falsehood flawlessly.

"Not Carl!" cried Steve Anderson in alarm and Jade felt her smile grow. But it was short lived for Anderson's anguished shout quickly turned to an irritating mocking laugh. "Oh, wait," he said with dull shrug of his restrained arms, "I have no idea who that is." He looked back up at Jade and Dry Stones had waggled his head with open amusement as he saw Jade's smile drop. "What? Do you think there is some type of initiation where all us recovered Humans have a meet and greet? We're all isolated from each other. Everything is compartmentalized."

Jade chastised herself. She needed to be very careful around Anderson. The young man was angry and it drove his brash and arrogant words. But he was not stupid and she had to be careful to not fall victim to his own lies and deceptions. Taking a breath, she willed herself calm and smiling. But instead of a presenting a big, bright grin she tried for a more earnest and mild smile.

Beginning again she attempted to recover from her earlier mistake, "Carl is being very helpful," lied Jade. "He's told us much about his assignments." Anderson's eyes narrowed in suspicion, but Jade could see his uncertainty at her words. Looking around the empty room she continued, "We're keeping him in a much better location. If you would simply answer a few of our questions, we would be happy to give you better accommodations."

Anderson was quiet for a few seconds as he considered Jade's request. She could see the conflict on the Human's face. His isolation had been going on for weeks and it was beginning to wear down his defiance. With a deep sigh, Anderson grumbled, "You're trying to con me, aren't you?"

"The offer is genuine," replied Jade in a comforting tone. Her smile grew sweet, "Just answer a few questions and we'll bring you a bed, something to read, better food…"

"Take your frilly little dress off and give me ten minutes with your body and maybe I'll answer some questions," spat Anderson as he stared at the floor.

Jade gasped and felt her face flush. Next to her she heard Dry Stone make a strangled sound in his throat. Incredulity and disgust raced through her body. She fought with her body to rein in her
reaction, but Anderson's next words left her shaking in rage. "What?" he asked with fake concern as he looked at the floor and then to Jade, "Afraid you might like it, little Angel?"

"You filth," said Jade through clenched teeth. "You will not touch this body."

"Why?" asked Anderson with a bitter laugh. "The body you wear isn't yours. You stole it like all the rest of your kind. If you get to use it, why can't I?"

Still trembling in anger, Jade lowered herself till she was level with Steve Anderson and could directly look him in the eyes. She almost hissed out her words, "We have tried kindness and offers of rewards for your cooperation. I see that is a wasted effort. It seems we shall have to try force. That is most regrettable."

Anderson snorted. "I'd love to see you actually try to torture anyone. To actually and deliberately cause someone pain." He looked to Dry Stones, who was standing rigidly by her side. "So what do you say Doc? You want to come over here and break some of my bones?" Jade saw the Healer's eyes widen in horror at the idea. Anderson sneered back at Jade. "Face it Angel, your kind – even the Seekers - doesn't have the stomach for torture."

Failing silent Anderson continued to glare at the two Souls. Silence fell in the room and Jade could only hear the sound of her body breathing in and out. Her earlier anger had turned into an icy cold calmness in her body. Now she spoke with deliberate and steady composure. "Only a Human would believe that coercion requires brute force. There are other methods." She saw Anderson's defiant gaze begin to waiver. Then adding with a growing smile, Jade said, "Perhaps you are right, Steve. Torture isn't something we are proficient at performing. But I look forward to learning…"

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Consciousness slowly returned to him. Memories rose and fell in his mind, a thousand fragments of his past, all in a muddled and tangled mess. Remembering his first bike ride and then disjointedly recalling the taste of milk. The body…No…his body felt heavy and sluggish as if he had not moved in a very long time. Nerve endings in his legs, arms, and back let him know he was laying on something soft and comfortable…a bed. He realized his jumbled nerves now heard new sounds and his disorganized mind started to put labels to the noises. The steady sound of beeps from a heart monitor, the quiet whirl of a fan, and then the sound of two people speaking.

"I think he's waking up," said one voice.

"It's been forty-two minutes since his exposure," said the other voice.

"That fits with what we're seeing. Recovering is usually in the first hour," said the first.

He tried to open his eyes and found them responsive. His vision was blurry at first but blinking a few times in a row let him see that he was indeed in a small hospital room. Sunlight filtered in through a nearby window, giving the room a sunny and warm feel as he gradually took in his surroundings.

"How are you feeling?" asked the first voice off to his right side. He shifted in bed and saw a darkly tanned middle-aged man looking down at him. The man's face was kind in a fatherly sort of way, with gentle blue eyes. The man smiled warmly when he turned towards his voice.
"Uhh..." he managed to groan out. His throat felt dry and chalky. He tried to clear his throat, but it came out as a gasping cough. He tried again with similar results. The kind-faced man nodded once to himself and moved towards a small sink at the far side of the room.

"No worries," he heard him say, "I'll get you some water."

"You're going to be fine," said the other voice on his left, it was harsher than the other man. He shifted back to his left and saw a tall, narrow-faced man standing over him. This man didn't smile and his face wasn't kind. It was a hard, stoic mask, with dark and distant eyes.

He blinked, uncertain to what was happening. A memory pushed its way to the foreground in his mind and remembered he was going to a party at UCLA. A girl had been handing out flyers on campus, telling everyone about this wonderful party and everyone was invited. He remembered she had been quite pretty and he had blushed when she touched his arm. Telling him she hoped to see him there. Her eyes had practically glittered with happiness.

The water was cold and refreshing as it touched his parched throat and he drank it down quickly. He let out a happy sigh and tried his voice again. "What's going on? Where am I?"

"What do you remember?" said the narrow-faced man.

"I…I…think I was going to a party," he said tentatively. He was increasingly feeling unnerved and anxious, but wasn't sure why. "Who are you?"

"Smith," said the kindly one to the other, "it's best we get him centered first." Looking down at him again, the man spoke softly, "I'm Doctor Richards, but you can just call me Bob. What's your name, son?"

"It's…uhhh..." he wanted to say "it's Bending Reeds" but almost automatically he knew that name was wrong. In fact, his whole mind cringed away from the words 'Bending Reeds'. He tried to understand why those two words created such misery in him. But what was his name? Panic began to rise as he realized he had no idea who he was. "I…I…don't know!" he said in a shout.

"Shhh," spoke Doctor Richards with an air of practiced ease at providing comfort to someone in distress. "It's alright. It's going to be fine."

"We've cracked the Seekers' database," said the one called Smith. Turning back to the narrow-faced man he saw the man was working a small tablet computer. "The parasites are great at record keeping. I'll have his original name in a second."

On hearing the word 'Seekers,' new memories were dredged up from within him. Strange and disturbing imagery. The feeling that something was very wrong with him. He felt his body begin to shake. Bob placed his hand on his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "I know how you feel. I was the same way at first," he said with sympathetic eyes.

"Here it is," said Smith looking up from his computer. Without ceremony, he announced the rediscovered name. "Jeremy Waller."

At the sound of his name, the thousand shards of memory reassembled in Jeremy's mind. All of his memories. Going to the party, that wasn't a party. Of being knocked out by the sweet smelling gas. Of the creature that slid in through the narrow incision on the back of his neck. The years...years! that past while he was Seeker Bending Reeds hunting down other free Humans. Everything that he had lost, everything that humanity had lost. His memories carried him right up till the moment he was knocked out by the black sulfur smelling cloud.
"Oh God," moaned Jeremy as his memories swept through his mind with the force of a hurricane.

Smith’s hard voice grew soft, almost as compassionate as the doctors. "It's alright Jeremy. We're going to take it back. We're going to take everything back."

Leaving Anderson locked in his cell, both Seeker Jade and Healer Dry Stone walked back down the short passage to the evaluator. Jade’s only words were to request the Healer restrict Steve Anderson’s diet to fluids only. As with the trip down the elevator, they rode back up without saying anything. But this time the silence between Jade and Dry Stones was far more pronounced and oppressive.

As the elevator began to slow, Dry Stones was the first to breach the silence. "Perhaps, Seeker Jade, it would be the best if we quietly disposed of Steve Anderson." His voice grew solemn as he spoke. "There is nothing we can do for the poor Soul trapped within him. It would be a mercy to put them both out of their suffering."

Jade was quiet while she considered Dry Stones’ request. But then she shook her head sadly. "No, Healer, we must find out what Anderson knows. The information he has could save millions of lives." Squaring her shoulders, her face grew determined. "We will get his secrets, by any means necessary."

Healer Dry Stones could only stare at the floor, his face cast in grave concern for what was coming. However, any further thoughts he had on this troubling future were interrupted when the elevator doors opened and revealed a man waiting for them in the alcove. With his stark face and his short sandy gray hair he waited patiently as the two disembarked.

"Seeker Sage of Tides," said Jade with a happy smile. "What a joy it is to see you."

"As you, Seeker Jade in the Hollows," replied the Seeker in a precise and commanding voice. He regarded the elevator the two had been traveling in and asked directly, "You were visiting the prisoner?"

"Yes," replied Jade, "unfortunately without much success." Watching Jade walk up to Sage of Tides, Dry Stands thought she looked particularly small compared to the tall Seeker. Clasping her hands together, Jade said smoothly, "It is fortunate we are meeting now, I have several proposals I would like to discuss. All designed to extract information from the prisoner."

Sage of Tides impassive face made a faint movement, something that could be almost called looking smug. "That may not be necessary, Seeker. I've just received news that we've discovered the location of the rebel Humans in the city of Chicago."

Chapter End Notes

As we see, Agent Anderson from the last story didn’t die but was captured. We’ll be hearing from him again. Seeker Jade is going to be a pretty central character to this
story. I like to think of her as the Anti-Wanda.

Next chapter things go poorly for Marc and friends.

As always, read, review, and enjoy.

-Walker
"Eric, for the last time, we're not watching *The Shining*," said Ian hotly as he took a seat next to Wanda. Knowing she did not like it when he got angry, he placed his hand on top of her's and gave it a gentle squeeze. Glancing back over to the stout resident hacker of their little community he added, "It'll traumatize the Souls."

Wanda gave him a gentle press of her own small hand in his. She turned in her seat to give Eric self-conscious shrug. "I don't want to cause a problem. If everyone really wants to watch this movie, maybe I and the others could close our eyes and cover our ears during the unpleasant parts."

Ian let out a mild groan and he shook his head in exasperation at Wanda's efforts to try to please everyone. After all this time, his beloved would still go out of her way to accommodated nearly anyone. Wanda turned to him with an apologetic smile when she heard his unhappy grumbling. "Wanda," he began, "if you do that you'll get about twenty minutes into the movie and then spend the rest of the time blind and deaf."

As a few other people wandered into the dining room, Kate sat down across from Wanda. The young woman appraised Wanda for a half a second and then nodded in agreement with Ian. "Yeah, Wanda you and Dry Sands would make it to the first scene with Danny and those creepy twins and that would be it."

"Oh," said Wanda in sudden understanding. "It's one of *those* movies." She made a little pout to Eric and to her credit, at least in Ian's opinion, saw Wanda's eyes narrow a bit at Eric. She was getting annoyed with the man.

Not long after coming to live with the Chicago rebels, Ian and Wanda had learned of one of their most cherished customs – movie night. Every Friday night they would gather and watch one of Eric's movies. The man had a wide variety of videos and music stored on his computers. The Archives of Humanity as Eric put it, preserving art and media that the Souls found either dangerous or distasteful. As Souls found even light-hearted comedies like the Brady Bunch a bit too much for their taste, Eric had gathered quite a lot of material. Eric was rather disdainful of Soul TV programs, explaining to Wanda how they were all shallow and mind-numbingly boring. Ian did not disagree but found Eric's complaints to be a little over the top. He was quickly learning from his new companions that Eric was like this about many topics and most of the others just ignored him when he went on one of his rants.

However, Wanda did listen to Eric and surprised the man when she asked to watch an actual Human movie. Stating she was curious to see just how it was better than shows produced by Souls. Ian was a bit uncertain, wondering just what movie he would choose. Ian was surprised by Eric's selected movie at first, but then realized it was an obvious choice – *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. It had been years since Ian had seen the movie and he sat eagerly with Wanda to watch. In the end, Wanda was no match for Spielberg's film. As a leaving ET touched Elliott with his glowing finger, telling the boy "I'll be right here" Wanda had broken down in tears. "It's so sad..." she had sobbed into Ian's shoulder. Ian realized to Wanda the movie was a painful reminder of her decision to leave them. And while their outcome was ultimately happy, Ian could understand how the movie would effect Wanda.
After the film had ended and Wanda had calmed down, Eric had then launched into a lengthy rant about the quality and the impact of drama and the need for an emotional reaction to build a decent story. That not everything could be a happy fluffy story. Wanda had not actually listened to Eric, but later she had confessed it was a good movie and her people were wrong to dismiss all Human entertainment as violent or hateful. Wanda's sentiments had lasted until the next Friday when Eric had managed to show her the first ten minutes of *Nightmare on Elm Street* before Ian had interceded. By then Wanda was white as a sheet and Ian more than a little pissed at Eric's practical joke.

Eric blanched from the expression on Wanda's face. He wasn't used to her getting annoyed as it so seldom occurred. "It's a good movie," he argued defensively. "Kubrick's use of color..." he trailed off as Ian and several others gave him a withering glare. No one wanted him to launch into another Stanley Kubrick lecture.

"Eric," said Wanda patiently, "if it means that much to you, I will watch your movie later. But the idea tonight is to watch something everyone will enjoy."

It had been Wanda's idea that Humans and their Soul allies take a break from planning and meetings and try to have an actual enjoyable time. No discussions of rules or frameworks for Soul and Human coexistence. A night without meetings on how to find more sympathetic Souls or ways to stop the increasingly paranoid Seekers. Or the seemingly fruitless task in tracking down members of the Facility. So the weekly movie night became cultural-exchange night. Souls and Humans would take the night off and try to have fun. Ian wasn't sure just how well Wanda's idea was going to work. While they had made progress in the last two months, there were still any number of pitfalls and problems for this group of Humans and Souls out to change the world.

Dell plodded his way into the hall and sat down on an old chair that let out a creak when it took on the big man's weight. "No offense Eric," rumbled Dell, "But we've seen that movie way too many times. Got ol' Jack's 'Here's Johnny' line etched in my memory. Wanda's right. Let's watch something everyone will enjoy."

"Thank you, Odell," said Wanda with smile.

"Not a problem, little lady," replied the man with a grunt.

Eric fumed, but Ian could tell he was going to get over his disappointment. The opportunity for him to show off more of his collection to Wanda and the other Souls was too tempting for Eric to ignore. As Eric went back to reviewing his video collection for an appropriate movie, an unhappy Mia came into the room. The young girl slumped into a chair next to Kate.

"How did it go?" asked Kate as Mia folded her arms on the table with a sighing frustrated noise. Mia did not answer right away, instead laying her head down on her arms like they were pillows. Again she made the half whimper and growl noise from her throat. Looking up from her resting position she glanced at Wanda and Ian and then finally shifted to face Kate.

"Mia tested. Mia poked. Mia prodded," explained Mia. Giving a overly dramatic yawn, she added, "I'm very tired."

Not for the first time Ian wondered if Mia's third person talk was genuine or just an act to gain her attention. Given her unusual background, it was entirely possible the girl really did have some sort of multiple personality disorder. He was still leery to let Mia too close to Wanda after their disastrous first meeting. Wanda, of course, was more than willing to be forgiving and friendly with the girl. But given Mia's bizarre ability to sense when Souls were near, even becoming physically
pained when she came too close to one of the aliens, kept Wanda at a distance.

"Did they figure anything out?" asked Dell

Mia just shrugged, not giving any form of a reliable response. But getting answers from her wasn't necessary as Simon and Healer Long Rivers came around the corner, both animatedly talking about their latest examination of Mia.

"I agree," said Simon to Long Rivers as both men sat down at the table. "We're going to need to do more than just a physical and blood tests. Something like a MRI scan to see what we are missing."

Long Rivers nodded and a gentle smile broke on his face. "I believe, Simon, we have something a bit more advanced than a 'MRI.'"

"Well," grumbled Simon, "is it portable? Can you bring it here?"

"That, unfortunately, it is not," came Long Rivers answer.

Both the Human doctor and Soul Healer gained the rest of the room's attention as they talked. It seemed to Ian that both Simon and Long Rivers had managed to reach an understanding after the Healer's apology to Annie. He wasn't sure if the doctor completely forgave the Soul but seemed to be willing to have a working relationship with Long Rivers. They had for the last two days conducted a number of tests on Mia to learn what the scientists of the Facility had done to her.

"So, any luck finding anything?" asked Kate.

Simon shook his head slowly. "No, just a few blood irregularities. Nothing that would point to a cause of..." He trailed off as he looked at Mia's resting form. Seeing how tired the girl appeared he started over saying apologetically to the girl, "I'm sorry Mia, we're going to have to run more tests."

Mia's answer was completely flat and unenthusiastic. "Oh. Joy."

As more people filtered into the dining room, Ian caught sight of Seeker Night Ember Lights. The young Seeker still looked a bit stunned when surrounding by Humans, as if he could not believe he was standing among his supposed enemy. It was still nearly impossible to Ian that they could have allies within the ranks of the Seekers. Ian mused that there was a time he would have thought any Soul willing to go against their own people was an impossibility. But as he felt Wanda's warm hand in his, it was all the proof he needed to know that sometimes the incredible did happen.

Leaning into Wanda so she could hear over the increasing background noise, he asked, "We even got Nigel for the night?"

"For a little while at least," answered Wanda with a nod. "Both he and Bright Moon can only stay a little while without attracting attention from the other Seekers." Looking back up Ian did catch sight of the blond-haired Seeker moving through the crowd.

"The Seekers must be getting really worked up if they aren't trusting their own members," observed Ian.

An expression of weary sadness filed Wanda's face. "Bright Moon says there have been more signs the Humans of the Facility are planning something. The Seekers are growing increasingly worried of a major attack."

Mentioning the Facility caused Wanda to shudder. Wishing he had not brought the subject up, Ian waggled a finger in front of Wanda. "No depressing talk for tonight, your own suggestion," he said
good-naturedly.

It had the desired effect as he saw Wanda push aside her grim mood and give him a little smile. "Ah, defeated by my own argument. I need to be careful around you, Ian O'Shea."

"Sure do, hon," replied Ian as he slipped his arm around Wanda's shoulders. She leaned into his arm, letting out a contented sigh. He inhaled the scented smell of her hair and let out his own satisfied breath. They both watched as Eric finished fiddling with his computer. The man straightened up from his laptop and cleared his throat loud enough to get everyone's attention.

"All right," began Eric to the assembled crowd of Humans and Souls. "I've looked through my library for an appropriate film we could all watch..."

"No more Kubrick movies," cried someone from the back of the room.

"I heard that!" snapped Eric. This was meet with gentle laughter from the Humans in the room. Giving an exasperated shake of his head, Eric began again. "Anyway, I think I have something everyone can watch. It's got comedy, action, romance, all the basic requirements for developing an engaging yet light-hearted story..."

"Eric..." warned Dell as he cut the older man off with a glare.

"Okay, okay," replied Eric tersely, "It's The Princess Bride."

"Oh, I know that one," said Wanda with no small amount of surprise. "Mel liked that movie, it was one of her favorites when she was a little girl."

Nodding agreeably Eric said, "Well then, that's good."

Ian could see Wanda working to recall the passed down memory from her time in Melany's body. He saw her make a faint disapproving expression towards Eric. A bit unhappily Wanda said, "Well the movie does have the part with the two men trying to stab each other with those...swords." She let out a little shiver at the recalled memory.

"Oh, come on," groaned out Eric. "That's the best part..."

"Thank you for coming. I do hope you enjoyed your time at the Hotel Rose," said Dashing Songs with a happy smile. While he could not see the two Souls standing in front of his lobby's massive front desk, he could hear the deep and even breathing from the Soul named Mitch. The sound of his partner, Melody in the Air's long skirt swishing let him know she standing just to the left of Mitch.

"Yes, we did," replied Mitch. The man's easy going voice affirming his pleasure at his time at the hotel. Dashing Songs could easily envision the man returning his smile and felt pleased. He heard the floorboard second to the right of the counter make a little squeak under the muffling carpet. Dashing Songs new this sound well, Mitch had shifted his weight and leaned in closer to the extensive ornate counter.

"Ah, you're looking at the wood carving of the furniture, yes?" asked Dashing Songs.

"Yes, very impressive," replied Mitch.
"All original. All hand carved," explained Dashing Songs as he ran a hand over the dark oak counter. The palm of his hand tracing the edge of the carving.

"The carving is a portrayal of the city skyline?" asked Melody in the Air.

"It is indeed," gushed Dashing Songs. The lavishly carved display etched on the front of the lobby's front desk had always been a source of pride. "It depicts the skyline of the city when the Hotel Rose was first built. Back in 1952."

"I do say, I believe it rivals carvings done by the Bears," said an impressed Mitch. His voice retreated and came from a new direction as he talked. Dashing Song could tell Mitch was slowly turning around as he examined the hotel's lobby. "Those Humans, when they put their minds to it, could certainly build a quality product."

"Yes," agreed Dashing Songs with a nod of his head. 'They certainly can,' he thought privately, thinking on the newly renovated second floor by his Human guests.

Changing the topic, Melody asked, "Does it bother you? Not being able to see? I know when I came here from Singing World what a wonder it was to be able to see all the beauty of this world. Undoubtedly the Healers could correct your host's defect."

"I have never felt my host was defective," replied Dashing Songs with a patient sigh. He was used to being asked this question. "I just enjoy the beauty of sound over sight."

"Ah...yes, of course," said Melody. Her voice implying she really did not understand his reasoning. Again Dashing Songs was used to the response.

"Shall we get going, dear?" asked Melody to Mitch. Although he could not hear it, Dashing Songs felt must Mitch be nodding yes in approval.

Dashing Songs smiled again and said, "Well, once again, thank you for staying at the Hotel Rose. I hope the rest of your time in the city is an enjoyable one."

"As do we," replied Mitch, his voice already moving towards the front door. "Have a good day, Dashing Songs." He could hear their soft footfalls on the carpet floor as the couple headed towards the exit.

As the old glass door opened and the sounds of gentle rainfall increased. There were brief sounds of the someone, most likely Mitch, struggling with an umbrella. A splash of a nearby puddle when a car moved down the road. And then Mitch and Melody in the Air were through the doorway to the outside. The glass door thudded closed and the sounds of the outside returned to a soft background music to Dashing Songs well-trained ears.

He busied himself with some cleaning around the lobby. The hotel did not get many guests, most people wanting to stay in a more modern hotel with a better view of the city. Dashing Songs did not mind. Sometimes it was nice to have peace and quite. Besides, he did have a number of long-term tenants, and they appreciated the privacy even more than he did.

Dashing Songs was delighted when Wanderer had come to stay with Marc and his friends. She was a little like him, a Soul who never felt like they fit in with the rest. Everyone seemed to think there was something wrong with him because he did not want to have his body's eyes repaired. He loved listening, to hear all the beautiful sounds around him. The creaks and groans of his old hotel, the steady traffic of the busy street, the soft pit-pat of the rain on the sidewalk. Vision would simply be a distraction from the continual symphony that surrounded him every day.
Pausing in his work, Dashing Songs straightened his body to listen. There was an unusual break in
the steady thrum of traffic from the outside. He could still hear the light rain falling on the ground,
but there was a muted quality to the other sounds from the world beyond the hotel's doorway. His
snowy white eyebrows coming together in confusion, he walked carefully closer to the entrance,
his ears tuned for any noise.

A sound came to him as he laid one hand on the frosted pane of glass of the full door to the outside.
Stomping, Pounding, the sound of many hard rubber soles smacking on the wet pavement. It was a
sound out of place, wrong, a dissonance in the usual orchestra of the city.

"No..." gasped out Dashing Songs as yanked his hand away from the door.

He had not even taken one step back when he heard the most strange noise. A snap, a thudding that
cut through the air, and a high pitched hiss. Then the twinkling shatter as the glass door exploded
into a million fragments.

The glass shards cut into Dashing Songs body. A thousand razor cuts in an instant. A scream of
agony pushed itself out of his lungs. Yet it was drowned out by the deep shudder of an explosion.
The whole lobby shook from the force. The blast loud enough to instantly rob Dashing Songs of his
precious hearing. All he could hear a steady droning ringing in his ears.

He realized he must be laying on the ground, but his entire body throbbed with pain from the
embedded shrapnel of the destroyed door. All of his remaining senses were at the moment too
badly muddled to make sense of anything. But soon he felt hands, many hands, taking hold of him,
lifting him up. And now there was only pain for Dashing Songs. Pain from the injuries, but a far
greater pain at his failure to provide warning to the hiding band of Humans. He had promised to
protect them. He had promised Autumn he would.

"Don't...hurt them..." he moaned out.

Deaf and blind, his body still reeling from damage inflicted upon it, Dashing Songs had only one
sense left to him. His nose picked up a burning acrid smell. Something was on fire. His voice
croaked out another plea, not let his beloved hotel burn. The only response was the smell of
raspberries.

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"Inconceivable!"

"You keep using that word. I don't think it means what you think it means."

On the screen, the two actors bickered about what to do about the pursuing man in black. Wanda
shifted in his arms and Ian had a feeling she was going to turn away from the screen in the
upcoming sword fight. It would be alright, if she didn't want to see the fight, Ian would make sure
he provided shelter in his arms.

Gentle, kind, Wanda. She never liked seeing someone getting hurt, even if it was the pretend fight
of a movie. Ian considered what was remarkable, that as a Soul, Wanda had dealt with far more
violence and danger than even some Seekers. He dangerous trek into the wilderness to find Jeb's
cave. The near constant threats on her life during her early days with the Humans hiding there. And
the armed soldiers of the Facility as they slaughtered the Souls in Chicago's administrative
building. Wanda never wanted to see others hurt. But was more than willing to endure such pain
herself, especially if it was to protect another.

Wanda snuggled into Ian, her face turning into the crook of his arm, as the sword fight between Westley and Inigo began. As Ian expected, she would rather not watch the battle. Turning his head, he glanced around the room. He caught sight of Night Ember Lights or Nigel. The young Seeker leaning forward in his seat, his eyes wide as he watched the screen. He was like a kid that had stumbled upon the adult channel on TV of the old world. Something scandalous, but also something provocative and Nigel could not turn away.

From the wall nearby Ian, the old payphone began to ring. Turning towards it, Ian frowned. He had been told Eric had wired the old phone into the wall. Connecting it to the jury-rigged phone system the rebels had built in the sewers and tunnels that ran under the city. The phone wasn't ringing like an ordinary phone. It was steady, continuous ring. And Ian felt his blood turn to ice.

"Early warning!" yelled someone from the back of the room. And all at once the entire dining hall was turned into chaos. People jumped up from their seats and chairs were overturned. In the tight space of the room, everyone was right on top of each other. Fear shot through the crowd like bolt of lightning. No space at all to move, and Ian had a disturbing thought of fish in a barrel.

Someone, Ian was pretty sure it was Marc, was giving orders in the hallway when there was muffled boom and Ian could the feel echo reverberations moved through the entire building. The tremor brought the jabbering panicked voices of Humans to silence. Wanda had been tucked to his side at the start of the alarm, but now she pulled herself away from him. Ian instinctively held on to her, the tight grip of his hand on her slender arm.

"Let me through," she said with a raised voice. Her voice becoming high and thin in her own growing panic. "Long Rivers and I can try..."

THUD. THUD. THUD. The sounds of shattering glass followed an instant later by deafening explosions. Like claps of thunder from a raging storm. These were not distant explosions, not from somewhere else in building, but from this floor. Ian could feel echoing shockwaves pushing through the air, ramming into his body.

"They're breaching the outer rooms!" yelled Dell over the cacophony of continuous rumbling of the building, frightful cries of the surrounding people, and the still ever ringing of the damnable payphone. The third floor of Hotel Rose had been the Humans' hiding spot for nearly three months. The floors above and below sealed off to provide a barrier to the rest of the hotel. On their protected level, only the inside rooms were used. Those facing out to the streets below were closed, less any watchful eyes see any activity on a floor that should have been shut down for repairs. There was only one conclusion to drawn, the invaders knew exactly where the Humans were hiding. And there was no doubt in the invader's identity – Seekers.

Only one thing they could do.

"Get to the escape hatch," commanded Dell.

Ian was close and with his hand still locked around Wanda rushed into the tiny kitchen attached to the dining room. He practically dragged Wanda with him. He leaned in on the old battered refrigerator and began to push with his free hand. In his other hand, Wanda twisted, trying to break free of his grip.

"Ian, let me go," she begged. "I can stop them. I can make them listen."
"No Wanda!" screamed Ian as he worked to push the fridge aside. It stubbornly would not move, he would need both hands to get the thing moved away from their last ditch path of escape. But he dared not let go of Wanda.

Shoving his way into the cramped space of the kitchen, Dell glowered at Ian and his delay in moving the decrepit refrigerator. "Move," he ordered. Ian had barely stepped aside when Dell grabbed hold of the appliance with two full arms and with a heavy grunt, tossed it to the side. It barely missed falling on a group of people standing right outside the kitchen. The refrigerator's removal revealed an open section of wall running from the floor of the kitchen to just below Ian's waist. Behind the opening the dusty grey-silver square walls of a ventilation shaft. Rather flimsy steps of a ladder attached to the far side of the shaft led down into an inky darkness.

Dell stood to the side and pointed to the opening. Before he could speak there was a fresh set of rumbling explosions and then a new and even more ominous noise, gunfire. Dell's one-word order, "Go!" rose above the growing sound of battle.

In a single file, one at a time, people squatted down and pulled themselves through. Ian took one nervous look around. How many people were here? How many had run in an hopeless attempt to delay the invading Seekers? He did not see either Seeker Bright Moon or Nigel. Were they in on the trap? Had the Humans been suckered by their offer of friendship? Or had the two Seekers been unknowingly found out, revealed to be traitors to the rest of the Souls?

More gunfire, rapid bursts from automatic weapons. The type of weapons the rebels did not have. The Seekers were closing in. Almost forget Ian belatedly remembered his right hand was still gripping Wanda's arm. He turned back to see tears streaming down her face. Of course, he was holding her too tight. He let go of his vice like hold.

"Sorry," he said as he felt tears build in his own eyes.

Wanda did not seem to even notice he had released her. "Let me...just try to...slow them down," she sobbed.

Ian leaned in and kissed Wanda. Ian O'Shea the Human kissed Wanderer the alien Soul. Maybe, in the back of his mind, Ian always knew this would be their fate. For this new world of the Souls, they were an impossibility. This world's equivalent of Romeo and Juliet. But Ian was still willing to fight fate, to try and change the inevitable. He could save her. Ian poured all his passion into the kiss. At first she was caught off guard by the kiss, but soon Wanda returned her lover's kiss just as intensely.

He let her go with a long, tremulous sigh and pulled back. Ian forced himself to refocused on the world that was outside him and Wanda. Kate, with Mia, was next in line to climb into the air duct. He braced himself and pushed Wanda to Kate's side.

"Take her," he told the small woman. Kate made the smallest of nods and took Wanda's hand in hers.

"NO!" screamed Wanda as she realized what Ian was doing. But Ian was already turning away, moving back into the dining hall. He could hear her struggle with Kate, trying to return to Ian. While Kate was no larger than Wanda, she had years of fighting, running, and enduring hardship. She was lean and strong, far more than the Soul.

"You will get in, or I will knock you out and throw you in," demanded Kate of Wanda.

The dining room was empty, chairs overturned, tables pushed aside. Their little band were either in
the air duct, climbing down to the basement or out in the hallways of the third floor fighting with
the Seekers. The noise of gunshots had died off, just a random scattering echoing from the nearby
corridors. Just outside the room a drifting silvery cloud was forming. Ian guessed it was a large
cloud of SLEEP. It billowed but was too dispersed and far away to effect him. Ian did not have to
turn when Dell stepped up beside him. The narrow shaft would have been difficult for Ian to use
and it would have been a downright impossible for Dell's massive body. The hatch had always
been designed as an escape route for the younger members of Marc's clan. If they were lucky the
Seekers had not yet headed to the hotel's basement. A small window of opportunity to get into the
tunnels below and hide the from the oncoming horde.

"You know," said Dell with a faint grin to Ian. "I was hoping Eric would show Butch Cassidy and
the Sundance Kid. It's been a while since I've seen that one."

Ian had to think a second, "I've never seen that one all the way the way through."

"Man," complained Dell. "You really need to brush up on your classics."

Ian risked a look back to the Kitchen. It was empty. Wanda was gone. He felt remarkably calm.

"As soon as we're done here," said Ian with a wry smile. "I'll get right on it."
Muffled and
unfamiliar voices filtered in from outside the room and shadows moved closer to the open
doorway. For the briefest second, a hand appeared in the doorway and tossed a small cylinder into
the room. It bounced and rolled on the floor until it came to a stop a few feet before Ian and Dell.
Ian tensed if it was going to explode there was really no chance to take cover. But it did not. It
made a loud snap and silvery white gas began to stream out of one end of the tube.

"It's SLEEP gas," said Ian in a rush as he sucked in a deep breath of untainted air. Perhaps his very
last breath.

Dell shrugged and curled his hands into fists. The big man's body tensed for the coming fight.
Before taking his own deep breath, Dell said gleefully, "Oh, good. For a moment there I thought
we were in trouble."

"I am bushed," said Kyle as landed heavily on hotel's bed. He stretched his long body out on the
mattress, consuming nearly all the bed's space.

Sitting in the hotel room's one chair, a rather flimsy piece of wooden furniture with a thin off-white
cushion, Jared just shook his head in bemusement. "What exactly did you do today?"

Kyle's eyes had drifted close. Relaxing against the bed's pillow Kyle did not immediately
answered. "I stood watch over the jeep," he droned lazily. "It's stressful work," he explained.

"Other than giving yourself a near case of heat exhaustion, you didn't do a damn thing today,"
responded an annoyed Jared. He got up from the chair and headed to the room's washbasin. A
quick turn of the tap and he filled one the plastic tumblers sitting on the counter.

"Someone's got to watch our stuff. Keep their eyes peeled for a Seekers checking the cars," replied
Kyle as he defended his actions. Jared saw the man finally open his eyes and meet Jared's gaze.

With more annoyance at himself than Kyle for letting the man keep insisting he watch the jeep,
Jared let out a sigh as he settled back down in his original seat. "Kyle, you're going to have to get
used to interacting with the Souls. Helping when we go into a store to get supplies. You can't expect Sunny and Melanie to do all the work."

Kyle let out a long breath, a puff of air powerful enough to rustle his dark hair. There was a time Jared would have seen this as a precursor to Kyle getting angry. A growing wind before a coming storm. But not now, Kyle's anger seemed to flow through the man and then out. Pursing his lips, he said softly, "It's easier for you. You've had a lot experiencing dealing with them." He paused and added a little reluctantly, "Plus you've got Mel."

"And you've got Sunny," shot back Jared. "Let her do the talking if you're worried about giving yourself away."

Before Kyle could respond the door to the outside swung open and Melanie and Sunny quickly came through. Melanie swiftly closed and locked the door. It might not really be necessary, but there was no sense taking chances. Both women were carrying paper bags, light brown sacks with patches of grease spots. Additionally Melanie held on to a drink carrier in her other hand. With a self-satisfied smile, she presented her bags and drinks to the two men. "Dinner time!"

Kyle lurched off the bed, already reaching for one of Melanie's paper bags. She snatched it away before he was even close. "These are mine and Jared's," explained the tall brunet.

"Kyle, I've got yours," said Sunny with timid little smile. She handed him one of her bags. "It's just the way you like it. Extra pickles and mustard, no ketchup."

"Hey," said Kyle with a surprised expression on his face. "Yeah, that is the way I like 'em. Thanks, Sunny." He pulled the hamburger out of the bag and barely took time to unwrap it before biting into the sandwich. He let out a croon of enjoyment.

Sunny smiled and then blushed at Kyle's evident satisfaction. "I'm glad you like it."

"Kyle, you should have seen her," said Melanie as she sat down on the bed and began to unwrap the food. "She ordered the food, and when they messed up your order she got right up and told them to fix it."

"But Melanie, they didn't mean to get the order wrong," explained Sunny.

"I know, Sunny," replied Melanie with an amused smile. "But the point is you didn't just meekly go along with it, you made sure they fixed the order."

Kyle reached over and gently squeezed Sunny's hand. "Look at you," he said, "being all assertive." And Sunny's blush deepened.

Food was quickly being devoured by the four, all of them hungry from a long day of shopping and securing all types of supplies for the caves. Kyle finished his first hamburger in less than a minute and quickly started another. Jared was more measured and careful than Kyle, but he too was quickly working on his second sandwich. As Melanie began to work on a pile of fries, she spoke up again.

"So when we were out," said Melanie with a toss of her hand towards Sunny. "We saw a sign for a farmer's market tomorrow in San Bernardino." Turning towards Jared she said neutrally, "I know that will be a bit of a drive."

Jared put down his second hamburger, his eyes going distant as he began deliberate the deviation in their plans. Weighing their options. "Hmm," he replied after a few seconds of consideration. "That's near LA. Big city with a lot of Seekers."
"I...know," stuttered Sunny as she understood Jared's concerns. "But I was thinking it would be a good place to get seeds for Jeb's fields."

Melanie just shrugged when Jared looked to her. "Yeah, it's closer to LA than we were planning. But the market is a big draw, people from all around. Lots of crowds of out-of-towners, easy to blend in."

Jared thought about it for a few seconds and then smiled and nodded to his three companions. "Sounds like a plan."

Chapter End Notes

All the characters I write carry certain qualities that come from people I know or myself. Eric's love of movies and his need to over analyze them is all me. I'm the worst person to take to the movie theatre. I realize that I promised a Sunny and Kyle story and so far they haven't hardly been in the story. But that will be changing very soon.

As always, read, enjoy, and review.
Bright Moon on Fallen Snow repeatedly blinked as the Healer's pen light blinded her in one eye. On the far side of the examination room a bright silvery reflection from her eye danced on the wall. At the same time, another Healer ran an instrument down her back. It was freezing as it touched her bare skin along her spine and she suppressed an urge to shrink away from the icy device. Not that she really could move much. Both her arms and legs were shackled to the examination table.

She had awoken here several hours ago and this was the third time she had been examined and like the previous two times the Healers were utterly silent as they worked. She was not quite sure what they were doing. Their examination of her host's body was extensive as if they were searching for something wrong with her body. Watching them work, Bright Moon thought they almost seemed puzzled but their tests. She had caught them several times exchanging confused expressions between each other.

Her throat was parched, the after effects of inhaling so much SLEEP gas. "Please," she managed to get out. Her raspy voice cut through the silence while the two Healers worked. The one working with the light in her eyes switched the device off. Putting the light down, he picked up a tablet and began entering some notes. Swallowing with some difficulty she tried again. "Please," she said faintly, "where are the Humans?"

At the word 'Humans', the Healer looked up from his writing and gave her a searching look. Even though he had examined her eyes, this was the first time he had actually looked at her. "What happened to them?" She dreaded the answer, but not knowing their fate was slowly driving her insane.

The Healer's body was middle aged, his skin an ebony black. His tall frame reminded her of Healer Long Rivers, but this man did not have a neatly trimmed beard. He watched her intently but made no effort to answer.

"Are they hurt? Are they..." broke off Bright Moon. Unable to ask her last question.

Clouded confusion covered the Healer's face as his forehead winked and his hazel eyes narrowed. It was as if she was speaking in a foreign language. He began shaking his head, trying to force the words she had spoken from his mind. Bright Moon closed her eyes, attempting to ward off a wave of misery. Of course, the Healer did not understand. How many of her own kind would? To freely help and support wild humans made no sense to her people. Humans were the enemy, they were dangerous and ruthless. They were all determined to attack and kill Souls at any chance they could get.

A pang of fear swept through Bright Moon as she thought about Marc. Was he dead? In the chaos of the surprise attack, she had lost track of him. Earlier that night, she along with Nigel had made their way covertly into Marc's people hiding spot in the Hotel Rose. They were going to, what Marc called, 'Movie Night'. A tradition his people had created when they had hidden in the tunnels under Chicago. Watching their old TV programs and movies in effort to recapture a small part of the world they had lost. Or possible it was just a way to pass the time. Wanderer had seen it as a chance for their small band of Humans and Souls to have fun and relaxing time. Bright Moon was not sure how this 'Movie Night' would accomplish such a task, but she looked forward to seeing Marc.

At one time, she would have never described herself as giddy, that feeling of erratic wild emotions
was just not a part of her being. But as she and Nigel made their way through the hidden back entrance of the hotel, Bright Moon had to admit she felt a nervous tingle in the center of her body. Anticipation of seeing his tall form with his boyish grin that she somehow found at once both infuriating and charming.

The Humans had already begun to gather in their dining hall, the room already growing cramped as people vied for space. She had seen the pregnant woman, Bright Moon believed her name was Sarah, with her young daughter. Attempting to be friendly, she had smiled at mother and daughter. But the pair had shied away from the two Seekers, the woman protectively pulling her daughter close to her. Bright Moon felt her smile drop, many of Marc's people were still wary of her. She had begun to wonder if coming tonight was such a good idea.

Nigel had wandered into the dining room when he had seen Odell Watson. It seemed the two were becoming friends of a sort. The big human seemed to treat Nigel like a little brother. In almost no time at all both were talking and smiling. Feeling a little lonely, she had gone looking for Marc. She found him in a nearby room speaking with Dry Sands on the Plain. The young woman's face was light rosy shade of red as she had talked to Marc. He had chuckled at something she had said and her blush grew. At the time, Bright Moon had felt a very odd feeling in her chest, one that she was not readily familiar. An emotion that was a cross of irritation and envy. She had not liked sensation and wished it would go away.

Marc had caught sight of her and excused himself from Dry Sands. Bright Moon had forced down whatever negative thoughts she had about seeing the two together and focused on Marc. He smiled warmly and Bright Moon had realized her cheeks were lightly flushing. Remembering their last meeting, sharing the brief but passionate kiss. He could so easily affect her emotions. But their relationship was difficult, for so many reasons, and it had slowly progressed in fits and starts. Human relations seemed so much more complicated than ones she had on the Mist Planet.

"I'm glad you could come, Bright Moon," he said happily. The grin on his face had then grown a bit bashful as he stood watching her. It seemed she could affect him as well. Bright Moon had begun to realize she might never really understand how the two of them could so influence each other and simply had to enjoy her time with Marc.

They had begun watching the movie with the others, but neither one paid much attention to the characters on the screen. "Sorry," he had whispered to her with a note of apology in his voice. "This movie probably isn't anything you would be interested in watching."

"It's alright," Bright Moon had replied with a small shrug of her shoulders. "I just don't really watch much TV. I don't find much of it very interesting."

Marc had cocked his head aside and asked curiously, "Human shows? Or the stuff you guys produce?"

Thinking it over she had said, "I've not seen much of Human entertainment. I don't much care for our TV shows." With a weak smile, she added, "Kind of dull, I guess."

"Well," replied Marc as he had worked to stretch himself out in his small chair. "You're not missing much. I was pretty bored with TV and movies when we Humans were running the show. Didn't improve much when you guys took over."

Bright Moon was going to ask Marc what he did do with his free time. There was still much she did not know about him. But there was a sudden ringing in the dining hall and Marc had gone stiff with alarm. He had turned to her and said one word - "Seekers." Marc's face had held no blame as he spoke the word, only a sorrowful regret.
Then someone had yelled, "Early Warning", and the entire room had erupted into chaos. Rapidly there had been a series of explosions. As if the whole building was being bombed. Marc's people had rushed to defend their home, but they found themselves quickly overwhelmed. Seekers clad in armored combat suits had rushed from the above and lower floors. She had tried to stop the invaders, tried put herself between her own kind and the Humans she had sworn to protect.

Bright Moon had believed they would not fire if they saw one of their own...Wrong. Before she had been able to open her mouth, one of the Seekers had shot her. Something immensely hard had hit her in the chest and she had fallen backward. On the ground, pain blossoming through her body, she gasped desperately for air. The Seekers had rushed forward, advancing rapidly down the hallway. One of the attackers had stopped while Bright Moon was still trying to suck in air. She fiercely tried to speak, to force words out, to plead for mercy for the Humans. But her efforts had come to nothing more than a painful moan. While the Seeker standing impassively above her had only responded by dispensing a misty silver cloud into her face. Then she had woken up here, chained to the examining table.

The Healers were now finished with their examination. As they packed up their instruments and made ready to leave the dark skinned Healer once again watched her intently. With a sad sigh, Bright Moon could not meet his gaze and looked down at the floor of the room. As they were leaving, she saw out of the corner of her eye the Healer shake his head. Still a mix of confusion and disbelief on his face.

Bright Moon sat alone in the room, feeling very cold and drained. The space was beginning to feel less like a Healer's examination room. It's sterile walls were starting to seem like a prison cell. She stretched a little, as much as the restraints would allow. Physically her body was fine, whatever damage that had been inflicted had been healed while she was unconscious. She was sure that the Seekers had used some type of non-lethal weapon. Perhaps rubber bullets or another kind of riot control gear. Which meant they had planned to take the Humans captive. That thought gave her a little bit of hope, Marc and the others could still be alive. But a new and dark thought came right on the heels of the first – The Humans would know what the Seekers planned and would do everything in the power to not be taken alive.

Abruptly the door to the room opened and three large men walked single file into the room. They were all dressed in the typical Seeker uniform, black colored dress pants, matching shirt, and white lapel. She did not recognize any of the men, they were not from Chicago or any other nearby city. With a sickening realization, she saw she was still dressed in her own uniform. She never had felt so...dirty.

The largest of the Seekers approached her slowly, cautiously. He appraised her silently for a long minute. When he spoke, she almost jumped for the sound. Their silence had gone on for so long and with no one speaking to her, Bright Moon had wondered if anyone was ever again going to talk to her. "Seeker Bright Moon on Fallen Snow," said the Seeker in a grave voice. "I'm going to release you from these restraints. You will stand and I will secure your arms." He bent in closer to her and spoke in a quieter, but no less harsh voice. "If you attempt to resist or flee, you will be forcefully stopped. Do you understand me?"

Bright Moon swallowed again with some difficulty. She really wanted some water, her throat was still so dry. But she did manage to get her faint reply out. "Yes, I understand."

He worked quickly and the chains linking her arms and legs were removed. Slowly she stood up and a new set of shackles were promptly put on her wrists. Then the three Seekers formed a tight formation around her. The one who had released her took up a position behind her while the other two went to her left and right side. They were easily close enough to grab hold of her body, but
none of them did. Instead, she felt something cold and hard press into her back.

"You will come with us," said the one from behind her. "Again if you attempt anything I will use my weapon."

A shock went through Bright Moon as she realized what was pressed against her back. A gun. The Seeker was threatening her with violence. She stammered out, "Please...I will not harm anyone."

The Seeker holding the gun spoke to the other two on either side of Bright Moon. "Be cautious, we don't know how much Bright Moon's host is influencing her. She may still be lying to us." The Seeker's assertion caused her to gasp out loud in surprise.

Bright Moon's three guards began to move and their pace forced her to move along quickly or have the Seeker's dreaded gun press into her back. All the while her mind was reeling from the Seeker's threat and his belief that she was being affected by her host body. She began to discern this was their explanation as to why she would be helping the Humans. A slow tendril of dread started to creep up Bright Moon's spine, she had been so worried about what the Seekers were going to do to the Humans. She had not given any thought to what they would do to her. Her own people saw her as unstable and deranged, a Soul taken over by her Human host.

Entering the hallway, Bright Moon realized they were in the Administrative Building and felt nausea rise in her stomach. Ever since the Facility's attack on this building she had avoided it, this building held too many reminders of the nightmare she had faced. Now she was adding another terrible memory. They did not go far, just down the hallway from her examination room. Turning a corner she saw another group of Seekers coming out of an open doorway. Upon seeing who the Seekers were escorting she stopped short, forcing her own guards to pause.

"Nigel?" said Bright Moon as she saw the dark-skinned man being led away. To Bright Moon, her fellow Seeker and conspirator whole body was shrouded in dark despair. His head bowed and his eyes downcast, he did not look up as he passed.

"Come along," said the Seeker standing behind her and they began to move once again. They steered her towards the open doorway. Passing through the door Bright Moon found herself in one the larger conference rooms of the Administrative Building. A big oval table sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by nearly two dozen identical light tan office chairs. Hanging on the far wall a widescreen video monitor displayed a frozen image of the outside of the Hotel Rose. Her escort slowed as they entered the room and Bright Moon meekly looked around. All the chairs except two were empty. A man and a woman sat next to each other, directly facing Bright Moon.

The man was older, tall and imposing. His light brown hair had a growing amount of gray. The woman, and in Bright Moon's estimation it was wrong to call her a woman. Her face was young, and given her small size it made her look childlike. Her delicate, wispy blond hair was cut short around her round face. And for the third time in the last few minute Bright Moon felt herself gape in complete astonishment, for she knew both of them. There would be few Seekers anywhere on Earth who would not know these two.

Taking a deep breath, she did her best to calm herself before speaking. "Seekers Sage of Tides and Jade in the Hollows."

Seeker Jade's small face broke into a bright smile. Pointing to a chair she said pleasantly, "Please, sit down."

The three unrecognized Seekers stepped away from her and Bright Moon, rather unceremoniously, dropped into her assigned seat. She sat as still as stone as the two prominent Seekers studied her
with calm deliberation. Finally, Sage of Tides spoke, his voice cold and commanding. "I will ask you this question directly. Am I speaking to the Soul know as Bright Moon on Fallen Snow or am I speaking to the Human named Julia Rickman?"

That was a name Bright Moon had not thought of for some time and hearing the name spoken aloud made it involuntarily shudder. Her host body's name, it's original name. Julia Rickman, the woman whom Bright Moon had erased. Like the Seekers who brought her here, Sage of Tides must think her host had regained control or at the very least was influencing her actions. Hesitant at first but her voice quickly grew firm she answered the question. "I am Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. My host's mind is quiet. She faded quickly after my insertion."

Both Seekers exchanged looks and Sage nodded once. Jade opened a folder and read it. "You were initially inserted in New York City over three years ago. You worked under Seeker Redmond and then transferred to Chicago a little over a year ago when a vacancy opened up. Up until recently you were tasked with finding and apprehending the Human fugitive Marc Walters." Jade looked up and with a distressed frown she continued. "During the plague you ended up working with this Marc Walters to thwart the disease."

Jade stopped talking and looked pointedly at her. Bright Moon guessed the Seeker was expected a response. Uncertain to what the Jade or Sage wanted from her, she merely nodded and said softly, "Yes, that is correct."

"In the report you filed, Marc and his companions escaped the hospital after the cure had been found. Our forces were stretched thin during the outbreak, and we did not start searching for the Humans until hours later. By that time they had disappeared," reported Jade as she flipped through the pages of the document. Now Sage addressed her, "It was reported you were ill, and incapacitated and couldn't stop the Humans. Was this true?"

Now Bright Moon understood. The Seekers were combing through her life and work, looking for when and how she had betrayed them. Trying to learn the depth of her treason. It was difficult for her to accept, as Bright Moon had not seen her actions as a crime. Only her attempt to protect a people from extinction. Their inquisition would tear away at her until they had an answer that would satisfy them. Would they believe she had started to fall in love with the very Human she had been assigned to capture? Or would they only see she had been corrupted, influenced by a dangerous Human?

But she had lied, both by omission and outright deception, and it was time she stopped. She had a desperate hope she could convince Sage and Jade of the truth. "No. I was weakened by the disease, but still able to find Marc before he escaped," she said in reply to Sage's question. She paused before continuing, taking a deep breath in and then letting it out. Bring a calm to her body and mind. "I let him go."

Bright Moon saw the man's reaction, a slight jolt of surprise run through his body. Sage of Tides had not expected her answer. At his side, Jade frowned and asked, "Why didn't you stop him? Or call for reinforcements?"

"Because...I didn't want to," replied Bright Moon. Memories tugged at her as she remembered and she began to retell of her time during the plague. Of Sister Mary-Margret on her death bed pleading with her to show the Humans mercy. The horrible field with so many bodies. Seeing Marc's sad but resolute face as he disappeared down the tunnel. As spoke she saw Jade's frown deepen and with a shaky sigh Bright Moon finished. "We were wrong...I was wrong about Marc and his people. They had lived here hidden in the city for years. They just wanted to live...they just wanted to survive."

Jade's face was hard to read. When she spoke, her voice was kind but carried a hint of displeasure
"But why?" challenged Bright Moon. "Why must we fight with them?"

Now Jade's voice grew cold, her cheerful expression vanished from her face. "The plague was created by Humans. Used by Humans to murder us. And you are trying to defend them!?"

Frustration growing with a sense of foreboding made Bright Moon sigh in distress. "I know there are Humans who wish to hurt us. But not all of them. Marc and others want to find peace with us. To coexist."

"Even if your story was true," spoke Seeker Jade as she turned herself in her chair, "the Humans should have been brought into custody as soon as it was safe to do so. It is far too dangerous to allow them to run around this city. And the very fact they threatened to reveal how to remove us from our hosts to the other Humans makes them a threat.

Jade was about to ask another question, or more likely another accusation when Sage of Tides interrupted the diminutive Seeker. "You have to understand how this sounds to us," he said as he rose out of his chair. "A group of Humans has been hiding in this city since we took over. You're asking us to believe they are not here to harm us. That they are not spying on us or a ruse to lead us into a trap. Seeker Night Ember Light made similar statements. But he is young, inexperienced, and too easily led by his first body's emotions."

Putting his hands behind his back, Sage of Tides began to walk around the conference table. "But you," he said solemnly, "are an experienced Seeker. Distinguished both on this planet and Mist World. You would not be so easily manipulated. When you were found at the hotel, it was assumed you were an undercover Human. Your Soul mutilated and gaged in its own body. We were greatly relieved when we found this wasn't the case. But that only raises the question as to why you are helping them. If you have not been manipulated through surgery, then the alternative is your own host is swaying your thinking."

"But my host is silent. My actions are my own," insisted Bright Moon. But even as she made her claim she could see Sage of Tides shake his head dismissively. With growing anguish, she could see all too readily where this conversation was headed. In their eyes she had been corrupted by her Human host and everything she said was a lie, or she was a Soul gone mad and raving insanely. She had to make them listen. If she could make these two Seekers understand, two of the most famous and influential in this world, then the Humans she had sworn to protect might have a chance. And in her desperation she saw a possible way, a very faint hope. And it would cost her, possibly everything. But before she made her gambit she had to know one thing.

"Please...Please, it doesn't matter what happens to me, but don't harm Marc's people. I can prove what I say is true." She saw Sage's eyes narrow,
uncertain what she meant. "Take me out," she explained. More tears ran down her face as her voice grew weak and quivering. "Take me out this body and put yourself in. You'll see my host mind is silent. Nothing...but empty memories."

Bright Moon gulped and forced herself to go on. "Just memories of my actions." She risked looking up at Sage of Tides. He remaining staring down at her, his expression indecipherable. "If you judge my choices wrong...then I will abide by your decision."

"Why?" asked Sage. He lowered himself until he was looking Bright Moon directly in the eyes. "Why are you willing to do this for the Humans?"

"Because, I promised I would protect them," she whispered in reply. Then Bright Moon on Fallen Snow finally said out loud what she knew in her heart, "And...and because I love Marc."
"So, Sunny, how do I look?" asked Melanie while she blinked a few time as her eyes got used to the contacts.

Sunny twisted in the front passenger seat of Jared's jeep. Melanie leaned back in her seat to let the sun shining through the window to fall directly on her face. Inspecting the brunette's eyes carefully, she saw a faint silvery reflection provided by the contacts. Nodding in approval, Sunny said with growing smile "Melanie, you look just like me." Then her smile dropped and the Soul added in a hurry, "Sorry, I didn't mean to insult you."

"It's okay, Sunny," replied Melanie as she slid the contact carrying case into her shirt pocket.

Next to her, Kyle also studied Melanie's fake eyes. With an amused shake of his head, he said, "Yeah we can go back to calling you Wanda."

Melanie pulled out of the direct sunlight and her eyes returned to normal. Shooting Kyle a dirty look, she then turned back to Sunny. "See, Sunny, that's how you insult someone."

"Well...the contacts do make you look like Wanderer," admitted Sunny truthfully. That earned her a faint groan from Melanie. Sunny mused silently for a few moments and then asked, "You received this pair of contacts from the Humans in Chicago? They did an excellent job."

"Yep," answered Melanie, "Marc and his gang do good work. But they only have a few good pairs of contacts so they could only give us this set."

Jared, still focused on the road as he drove, spoke. "And that's something I hope to correct while we're on this trip. If we can get enough of those contacts, we could get more people into the raids without worrying about attracting Seekers."

"Scott warned us not to be too comfortable with these things," countered Melanie. "The contacts can't completely mimic a Soul's eyes. If you shine a bright light on my face, it won't reflect like a Soul's."

The jeep slowed as Jared carefully navigated the large parking lot he had turned into from the main road. "Well, believe me, it's definitely better than nothing," replied Jared as he spotted an empty parking space. It was farther out from the entrance to the farmer's market then other spaces, but it would offer a greater amount of privacy.

Turning off the engine Jared finally turned in his seat to look at Melanie and her eyes. She smiled as she batted her eyes playfully at him. When she saw the expression on Jared's face, she abruptly stopped. He had gone very still and had noticeably paled. Worried, she asked, "What's wrong?"

Jared shook himself, trying to push away the dismay in his face. "You really do look...like before."

"It's still me," reassured Melanie.

"I know, Mel," said Jared as the tension in his voice eased. Eagerly changing topics, he looked around the parking lot as few more vehicles pulled into the parking lot. "Looks like they will be busy today."
Following Jared's watchful gaze Melanie looked around and nodded. "Well, we should be able to blend right in."

Sunny pulled her seatbelt off and opened the door. Starting to get out she saw Kyle was still sitting in the back seat. His face a mask of tight concern, worry lines running from his eyes as he took in the growing crowds. Timidly she reached out with her hand and after a second of hesitation she touched his hand with hers. Kyle gave a start and his head whipped around to face her.

"Sorry," she gasped out as she yanked her hand away.

Kyle's features softened as he focused on her. "No, I'm sorry Sunny. I didn't mean to scare you."

Glancing out the window a weak smile formed on Sunny's face. "There's hardly a cloud in the sky, Kyle. You can wear your sunglasses. Nobody will think anything of it."

Looking back one more time at the busy farmer's market Kyle nodded slowly. "Yeah, your right, Sunny." Letting out a sigh, he opened the jeep's door and stepped out. Sunny followed and they quickly joined Melanie and Jared in the parking lot. Jared already had his pair Ray Bans on as he once again was cautiously scanning the area.

"Okay, so how do we do this?" asked Kyle as he put his own set of sunglasses on. He glanced at Melanie and Sunny and then let out a nervous laugh. "We let the fake Soul lady and the real Soul lady do all the talking for us?"

"I reckon," replied Jared. "But I can manage if need be. No point acting like a mute or something. That'll just draw attention."

"Kyle, just be polite and soft spoken, and you'll be okay," said Melanie. She heard Jared snort in derision. The idea of Kyle being forced to be soft spoken greatly amused him. Giving her lover a withering look she added, "Goes for you too, mister."

The California sun was high overhead as the four made their way into the large open field hosting the farmer's market. Row after row of little booths filled the area. Some were little more than tables with stacks of fruits and vegetables. Others stalls were larger with tented roofs of various colors. A cool light breeze blowing from the Pacific Ocean caused a steady fluttering of multicolored flags and banners. There was a naturally festive atmosphere to the market as Sunny, Kyle, Melanie, and then Jared entered the maze of stalls. Families and other groups of Souls drifted from one stall to the next. A relaxed and laid-back chatter of conversations flowed nearly continuously through the air.

Working in pairs, Sunny with Kyle and Melanie with Jared, moved up and down the aisles as they sampled and searched for suitable plants to be used in Jeb's caves. Sunny worked well as she stopped at each merchant, with Kyle at her side she was beginning to enjoy herself. She was finally shedding her anxiety of going on raids. Fearing she would be terrible at telling a lie, Sunny had been initially very reluctant to leave the safety of the caves. She intensely dreaded getting Kyle and the others caught. But Wanderer had been right, raids were not really scary. It was just like going shopping.

"Thank you, Summer Winds," smiled Sunny as she took the bag of corn from the elderly woman. Next to her Kyle coughed and said a little stiffly, "Yes. Thanks." The Soul smiled happily and waved goodbye.

Walking back into the busy pathway that stretched through the many tents and awnings Kyle asked, "Corn? We've got plenty of that back home."
"We can dry the ears for seeds," said Sunny. At Kyle's quizzical look, Sunny explained in greater detail, "It's important to introduce new seeds from outside sources when growing corn. It prevents inbreeding depression of the crop."

"Really? How do you know about..." Kyle drifted off mid question. "Jodi knew about that stuff," he said with a sigh as he answered his own question. "She wanted to become a plant doctor...a...ah..."

"Botanist," finished Sunny in a whisper. She looked up at Kyle, his eyes unseen behind his sunglasses made his face distant and impossible to read. Tears began to form in Sunny's eyes. "I'm so sorry," she blurted out.

Not wanting to draw attention to themselves Kyle led Sunny over to an empty tent. A sign on the table in front read - "Be back in an hour." Kyle gave a quick glance around to make sure no one was paying them any attention. They hunkered down behind a large unused counter to give them a little bit of privacy. Kyle brought his big hands up and ever so gently wiped away Sunny's tears. "Shh..." he breathed. "It's alright. I'm not blaming you."

After Jodi had failed to wake up, Sunny had taken upon herself to not cause Kyle any further pain. Simply being in this body was a daily reminder to him about what he had lost. She had gone to great lengths to not further remind him of Jodi. Now trying to be helpful to her Human friends she had accidentally hurt Kyle. His kindness, his willingness to forgive her for taking his Jodi away, caused a fresh set of tears to run down Sunny's little face.

Pulling Sunny in close, Kyle held her as she cried into his shirt. "Baby, you're going to get the whole surrounding neighborhood worried about you. We don't need that type of attention right now," said Kyle dryly, but also with a note of caution in his voice.

"Sorry," sniffed Sunny.

"You want to go back to the jeep?" asked Kyle. Still concerned about her sudden breakdown.

Sunny rubbed at her eyes, trying to wash away any lingering tears, as she pondered Kyle's question. "Maybe for just a little bit."

"Okay, let's go tell Mel and Jared," standing up from behind their hiding spot Kyle surveyed the crowds looking for their companions. As he searched he suddenly went rigid with alarm. His fist tightened at his side he spoke one word out like it was a curse, "Seekers."

A jolt went through Sunny as well. "Where?"

"Down near the entrance. There are two of them," replied Kyle. Studying the pair, he mused, "I think they might have been checking cars."

"We need Melanie and Jared."

Kyle's head bobbed as he agreed with Sunny's appeal. "Need to find them first," muttered Kyle as he continued to look for the other two humans. Sunny felt a tight ball of regret settle in her stomach. They would not be in this predicament if she did not start weeping. "Damn," said Kyle abruptly, "They're heading this way."

Sunny started to get up when Kyle stopped her. "No," he said quickly, "Sunny if they see you've been crying they'll get suspicious. Just stay here and I'll get Mel and Jared. They'll help us get out of here."
"But..." stammered Sunny meekly.

"Please, Sunny, just stay here out of sight," pleaded Kyle. Sunny nodded once acceptance and Kyle returned a brief apologetic smile. He shifted discreetly from his hiding spot and rejoined the steady stream of people walking past the empty booth.

Sunny pulled her legs in tight to her body and rested her chin on her knees. Several minutes passed and Kyle did not return. She felt a wave of misery settle throughout her body. Everyone was in jeopardy because of her. So much guilt, what could she do? Sunny tried to think what Wanderer would do in this situation. Wanderer was so good at telling stories, she surely could tell the Seekers a convincing lie that would make them go away.

More time passed. What was taking Kyle so long? A more distressing thought came to Sunny. What if he had already been caught? Her guilt was quickly washed away by a growing panic. Sunny trembled in the shadows behind the big table. It felt like her heart was going to shatter in her chest. Outside the stall the sounds of people walking past had not changed, maybe the Seekers had already moved on. She had to know. She had to see what was happening.

Summoning up all her courage, Sunny unfolded her legs and then slowly rose up until she could look over the top the table. There were fewer people around now and she had no problem spotting the Seekers. They readily stood out from the rest of the crowds. Two men wearing matching tan shirts and shorts stood several booths away chatting with a young woman who had brought several boxes of oranges. Their clothing was not what made them stand out, but the gun holsters attached to their belts. Only Seekers would carry weapons.

But as Sunny watched, the Seekers did not appear to be looking for anyone. Instead, they smiled and continued to chat away with the woman and her oranges. After a little more friendly conversation, she handed one of the Seekers a bag full of fruit. It was only then that Sunny understood. The Seekers were not here to hunt for Humans. They had come to enjoy the Farmer's Market like all the other Souls. Kyle had simply over reacted and Sunny felt a flood of relief run through her body. Sunny relaxed and sunk down against the table. They were safe.

"Excuse me miss, what are you doing here?"

The words had come from above her and Sunny's head snapped up to see the source. Curious blue eyes looked down at her while his square-jawed face wore a mild smile. Her heart froze in chest. Standing over her was one of the Seekers. Sunny's mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"We saw you crouching behind the table and wondered what was going on," elaborated the Seeker. He continued to look at her with a mix of curiosity and concern. Frozen in place Sunny could only gape up at the man.

Worry began to build on the Seeker's face and his smile began to fade. "Is there something wrong?"

"N...N...Nooo," stuttered out Sunny. Her eyes darted frantically up and down the pathway looking for Kyle, Melanie, or Jared.

Her nervous sputtering and behavior only sever to sharpen his attention. The Seeker also began to look around, his eyes wary. But among the Souls happily walking around there was nothing to draw his attention. Turning, he called to his comrade. "Frank, I think you should come over here."

Desperately Sunny tried to calm down and to stop her nervous panicking. As the other Seeker approached, she managed to whisper out. "I'm...m...m okay. J...J...Just waiting for my friends."
The Seeker named Frank came up to the table and looked at Sunny and then the first Seeker. "What's going on here Jasper?" He was thinner than the first and his dark black hair reminded her of Kyle's but it was much shorter.

"This young lady seems to be in some sort of distress," explained Jasper. He looked back down at Sunny with a helpful looking smile. "Your waiting for some friends? Are you not feeling well?"

"Yes," replied Sunny. Her one-word answer was finally sounding louder than a faint breeze. But her answer only served to confuse the Seekers.

"What's your name dear?" asked Seeker Frank in a kind voice.

"S...Sunlight Passing through the Ice," answered Sunny truthfully. As soon as the words left her mouth she knew it was a terrible mistake. She was never to give out her real name. If the Seekers investigated, they would quickly tie it to her disappearance from Las Vegas. But it was in her nature to tell the truth and the words had come out naturally.

Seeker Jasper's smile had returned. "Well Sunlight, where are your friends?" He asked as he once again looked around the area.

Sunny stopped herself from answering. She had messed up so badly. If she had only remained out of sight like Kyle had told her, none of this would be happening. Wanderer or Melanie could have lied their way out of this, but not her. Sunny knew she would never be able to lie convincingly. Then she remembered the little pill in her pocket Kyle had given her. He had told her if they were ever in danger of getting caught to use it. It was supposed to be quick and painless. She had cried when he had first given it to her, stricken by the awful idea of losing Kyle.

Tears again sprung from Sunny's eyes. Did she have any other choice? If she ended herself the others would be safe, she would not be able to betray them. As droplets of moister worked their way down her face both Seeker's lowered themselves down to sit next to her. Clear worry on their faces as they tried to understand her heartbroken sobs. They attempted to calm her, but Sunny only cried harder.

"Now this is really convenient," interrupted a new voice.

Both Seekers looked up, frowning. Sunny managed to turn her eyes upward as well, wondering who else she had attracted with her weeping. There was a young man standing above them. His face was darkly tanned and it contrasted with his white teeth in his broad smile. But the mirror shades of large aviator sunglasses made the rest of his face unreadable.

"Who are y..." got out Seeker Frank when the stranger raised his hand above them. In it he held a gray cylinder. Without any warning, a burst of dark colored gas jetted out and enveloped both the Seekers and Sunny. Almost immediately Seeker Jasper began to cough and sputter. Seeker Frank did not even do this, his eyes just rolled back in his head and his body collapsed on the ground.

With the tears still in her eyes, the dark fog stung as it reached Sunny's face. It smelled awful, like something rotten. But before she could even think of holding her breath the black gas was already breathed in. The noxious smoke made her want to cough, but at the same time it made Sunny feel so very cold. It was ice running through her veins. She managed one or two small coughs, her body feebly trying to get the inky substance out. But it was far too late.

Sunny felt her body grow numb and the sounds and sights of outside world rapidly began to dim. Everything, every part of the being called Sunlight Passing through the Ice faded. It was like being tossed into a dark abyss where there was no light at all. It pulled on Sunny, icy tentacles sought to
drag her down. She had one desperate thought before it yanked her into darkness.

'Kyle!'

Then there was nothing and Sunny fell, hurtled into a deep and pitch-black prison. She wanted to cry out, but she had no voice. She tried to move, but nothing happened. In this desolate void Sunny found herself there was no light and no feeling.

Trapped in the emptiness Sunny gradually became aware that she could still hear. Coming from a long ways away she detected the faintest of voices. Nothing more than a murmur at first but it slowly and steadily grew. Eventually, Sunny could make out words. The voices were still muted as if her ears were packed with gauze, but they were audible.

"It's a good thing you were here Healer," said one voice.

"Indeed," came a second voice. "People sometimes forget that too much exposure to this planet's Sun can cause problems in these bodies."

"So it's just sunstroke?" asked the first voice. It sounded like the speaker was a woman.

"Yes, I'm almost certain. But I've called for an ambulance, just to be sure," answered the first. This voice sounded like it came from a man.

"I'm so glad it's nothing serious," replied the woman.

"Well, we should give them some space. Can you keep the crowd back?" asked the man. His voice sounded vaguely familiar.

"Yes, of course, Healer," said the woman agreeably.

A crack of light appeared in Sunny's dungeon. Blurry, dull light entered her newly opened eyes and Sunny could make out vague shapes. She was on her side laying on the ground. Near her, there were two light brown lumpy shapes. Her eyes blinked several times and her vision improved. Sunny could see she was in the far corner of the tent and the two forms laying next to her were Seekers Jasper and Frank.

Someone stalked into her line of sight. It was the same tan skinned man who had sprayed the strange black mist. Under his breath, he muttered irritably, "Idiot worm, the last thing I need is everyone gawking at us."

Sunny tried to shrink away from this strange man. He terribly frightened her, but her body did not respond. Instead, it's hands weakly opened and closed and her head slowly rose up off the ground.

"Hey," said the tan skinned man in surprise as he saw Sunny's body move. "You're already waking up," Excitement rose in his voice and struggled to keep quiet. "That's good. That's real good!"

"W...W...What'sss go..going on?" said Sunny's voice.

The unnamed man squatted down right before her and spoke urgently. "I know you're really confused. And scared. But I need you to be calm and quiet. We're not safe just yet."

Sunny heard her voice ask, "W...Who are you?" But Sunny had not asked the question. She had not tried to speak. Rising horror flooded through Sunny. Her body was talking on its own.

A friendly smile broke on his face. "My name's Jeremy. Do you remember your name?"
"My name..." began Sunny's body.

'My name is Sunny! My name is Sunlight Passing through the Ice!' cried Sunny, but that did not come out of her mouth.

Instead her voice said, "My name is...Jodi."

Chapter End Notes

I don't believe its explicitly stated but I believe its implied Jodi and Kyle were college sweethearts in the novel. Having Jodi studying to be a botanist was just an idea I went with. Again we're seeing the power of this new cure. But how exactly it works will be explored as Jodi recovers. I'm laying the foundation for some major revelations down the way. As always, read, enjoy, and review.
And now for something a little different. Don't worry, we'll be getting back to Marc and the others soon.

The ending approaches. I can feel it. After all our waiting, after all our planning, the time of our retribution is at hand. I confess many times I doubted my actions. Wondered if all my schemes and experiments were ever going to produce something of value. And I despaired at the thought my race would never have justice. That our silver worm enemy would once again conquer another species.

I stand, nearly motionless with my wings folded around me, in the corner of the Humans' operation center. Alex and the others are busy with their plans. I watch silently as they work. Their plans are actually my plans. But it is important they feel in control. Ultimately the success or failure of our undertaking will rest on their strange shoulders and they must be utterly committed to the endeavor.

So I find I have little to do but wait. Wait for the parasite horde to descend. Coming like a swarm of insects to destroy the threat to their nest. They will believe, not incorrectly, that their massive numbers will bring them victory. It has so in their past, but not this time. But I have spent enough of my days devising their destruction. Instead of thinking of the future, I find myself pulled back to the past, to the beginning...

I was barely more than a hatchling when they came to our planet. Ours was a colony world, one of the many we had settled and domesticated since my kind had left our home planet. They arrived in our colony spaceships, great world ships that could carry tens of thousands of us between the stars. It is one of my earliest memories, looking up and seeing the dozens of massive ships filling the sky.

From these vessels they descended in legion. They looked like us, sounded like us, but it grew quickly apparent something was very wrong with our brethren. Our visitor's beautiful yellow-red eyes were corrupted with silver. And such strange words came from their mouths. How they were going to bring peace and harmony to all the worlds. We learned too late what was actually happening. Their 'peace' was nothing more than the complete subjection of our bodies. The reality was hard to comprehend. Our kind was being taken over, both in body and mind, by a silver worm parasite. The parasites had come from another colony world and like a virulent plague they were spreading through our Empire.

I was so young, many of these details to our fall I did not learn until later. But I remember running, the panic, the desperation as the few of us not infested tried to make it off the planet. My progenitor carried me to the last safe shuttle, the infected chasing us the entire way. Placing me on the ship, she turned and faced them down. It was her...sacrifice that allowed us to escape. The memory of her standing tall with her wings extended, ready to fight, will stay with me to my very end.
We escaped on a starship and here we were luckier than most. Our small band of resistors managed to gain control of a deep space exploration vessel. It was designed for long distance travels. Fast and nimble it would carry us to a neighboring colony world much more quickly than the lumbering colony ships. The infested had done all they could to cut communication with the remaining free worlds. So it fell to us to bring warning to the rest of the colonies, let them know the great danger of these parasites.

It is an incredible vast emptiness between the stars. Even with our ship's great speed it would still take many years to reach our destination. The newest of my people's technology had gone into our starship and it allowed us a type of cheat. The cold sleep chamber on the ship would freeze and preserve us on the long journey. As we travel from the only home I had ever know, I was placed in the chamber and a deep biting cold dragged me into a dark oblivion. I would awake decades later and it would be as if hardly a day had passed.

Having crossed the void between stars, we neared the colony world with its two red suns. But it was all for nothing, our warning was too late. The wretched worms had already infected all of our people on the colony world's surface. It was there we heard the most horrible of news. Our home world, which had endured for countless millennia had been taken by the parasites.

We were told to surrender. We were told to submit. The parasites controlling the colonists informed us coolly there was no place to run. All our worlds had been taken. We, in their collective opinion, were a cruel and unfit race. Their conquest over us was for the greater good, they would improve the worlds that were once ours.

How? How were we cruel? What had we done to them to warrant such ruination? To this day, I do not know. But it matters not, I am now far beyond caring for the silver worms' pathetic justification. I am only interested in their annihilation.

We ran. There was no other choice. And the parasites followed. Seeking us, hunting us down. Our lone ship had speed, but they had so many ships. Escaping the planet we frantically tried to avoid capture. Far from the double red suns we traveled to hide in the icy depths of the star system. Among the frigid ice worlds we waited, hoping they would give up the chase. But they always came and we would run. It was a long, dangerous game of hunter and prey.

There was just a handful of us on our ship. Were we such a great threat to them that they would send so many ships after us? Even at my early age I began to understand these creatures thinking. Anyone who is not one of them, not under their control, is a threat.

Watching from a distance we learned a good deal about these worms. They have great power in their numbers. Unified and coordinated, they worked with very little discord. But their ultimate strength lay in controlling the mind, for an inserted parasite knew everything the host did. Once, during a raid to secure resources, one of our number was captured. He returned as one of them, with dozens of enemy ships at his back. Calling us by name, he pleaded with us, told us the joining was not painful, that we had nothing to fear.

Lies. Nothing but lies. Our leader killed him on the spot and we narrowly escaped the trap.

In a dead comet, we finally found a measure of sanctuary. We hid our ship within a dark crater on the hunk of dirt and ice. When we sure we had not been followed I and the others once again entered the cold sleep chamber. This time we would sleep for centuries as the comet slowly drifted out into deep space. Once free and clear, far from any watching eyes, we awoke.

Before our long sleep, we had managed to plunder enough resources to allow us to travel a considerable distance. But where to go? We had to face a sad reality that our worlds were gone.
There was still hope that some of our numbers had managed to escape the invasion. Like us, others might have managed to get a workable starship and flee into the darkness.

So we began our great search. Beyond our explored borders, far from where the worms in our stolen bodies traveled, we hunted for survivors. In an ever growing outward spiral, we journeyed from our worlds, farther and farther into the unknown. Transiting from star to star, looking for our lost people. We made regular use of cold sleep. Slumbering for decades or centuries, as our starship crawled its way between distant suns. It became our routine: We would wake from our long sleep, search the nearby worlds fruitlessly, resupply as best we could, and then depart as we returned to our deep sleep.

Among our ship's cramped quarters, narrow hallways, and between recyclers for air and water I grew slowly to adulthood. My growth was considerably arrested by our reoccurring use of the cold sleep chamber. By the time my wings had finally grown out I was many millennia old, even though physically I was still a youth. Early on in my adolescence I spent much of my time reading and studying. I felt it was my duty to remember everything that our once great race had known. From biology to physics, how our bio-nanotech worked at repairing damaged cells to our ship's engine which could carry us such vast distances. As I grew older, I took my place with the others in maintaining our starship.

I was working at the command center when we first detected the new ship. The design was similar to ours but also distinctly different. We were now far from home, in a system with a large yellow sun and this visitor drew our immediate attention. There was great rejoicing, but also measured caution. This ship could be full of fellow refugees like us, or it could belong to our enemy. It was entirely possible that even after all this time the parasites still hunted for survivors.

Like a timid newborn the new ship moved cautiously to a nearby planet. There it carefully explored the planet from orbit. Ever vigilant we too approached the world. We were subtle and hidden, owing to our long familiarity with our vessel and knowing how to hide. Gaining access to this mysterious craft we were on board before its inhabitants could begin to react.

On board the ship, we found a new race, one that we had never encountered. It was a many-limbed being with a three humped body and oh so many eyes. They were fast and agile. However, we had the element of surprise. But what we found once the creatures were subdued brought us renewed horror and revulsion. They were infected with the very same silver parasite. The worms, not content with taking our people, were spreading to other races.

It came as no surprise to us that the aliens' ship was like ours. The would-be conquerors were using our designs for their own exploration. Our attempts at removing the parasites from this multi-armed race proved useless. The worm's many thread-like appendages shredded the creature's brain as we tried to pry it out. With few other options, we sacked the ship for anything useful. Then we destroyed it, leaving no sign of our presence.

Giving up is never easy. We had tried so hard, searched so long, but we had found no trace of any survivors. Now confronted with the knowledge our enemy was slowly spreading we had to change. We had to adapt. The hunt for our kind must come to an end. With sickening dread, we realized we were all that remained of our race.

We had endless debates about what to do. Some of us wanted to make one last valiant stand against the silver worms. To go out in a blaze of fire and glory. Others wanted to run as far away as we could. Put as much distance between us and the parasites as possible. But it was my suggestion that eventually lead to consensus. I too wanted to strike back at our race's killers, but I saw little point destroying ourselves in an attack that would do little to stop these monsters. I suggested instead we
look for allies. For other races among the stars. In all our exploration we had not found any intelligent space-faring races. Yet the galaxy was vast and we had explored only a tiny corner.

I was certain somewhere, out among the countless stars, there must be another race who could help us. A people who could fight back...

Chapter End Notes

A few words on the Vultures from The Host. When the idea came to me about introducing the Vultures as the real power behind the Facility I reread sections of the book that covers them. There wasn't a lot. Beyond Wanda's brief description of her people's beginning we don't know much. We know they have wings, but their name is not a real description, only of their character. But you also have to take into account their description is based on the Soul's viewpoint. Now that viewpoint might be completely warranted, but like a lot of my story there will be a lot of gray. No race is either completely evil or entirely good. We see from Paz's point of view that he and his people were the victims.

So ultimately it came down to my decision on how to describe the vultures. I wanted to try to stay in canon as much as possible, but I also wanted the Vultures in my story to be survivors of the souls' actual invasion. Not to be some distant descendants. It required a bit of thinking to make this possible. Wanda states when the vultures came it was a long time ago. After the dinosaurs but before us. That is...a really long amount of time. In this case I opted for the nearer end of that time range. I estimate these events Paz is recalling happened about 200,000 years ago. But with the cryogenic chambers Paz is slowly but steadily approaching the present.
With a start, Marc Walters opened his eyes. He almost immediately winced at the radiant overhead lights shining down upon him. Squinting, he was able to cut down the glare to a manageable level. He was lying on something firm yet yielding, at a shallow incline. Trying to sit up, he quickly found that his arms and legs tightly restrained. Finding he could move his head, he rotated back and forth as he took in his surroundings. He was in a small room with blue gray colored walls. There was a distinct barren feeling to the room. There was little more than the table he lay upon and nearby empty desk. Too clean, too sterile. He shuddered as he realized he must be in a Soul Healing facility.

Lying there on what he assumed was an examination table, Marc became aware of several important facts:

One, he was not dead. In fact, he felt remarkably well. Considering his last memory before waking up here was getting shot in the chest by an armor shrouded Seeker. The Souls must have healed him while he was knocked out.

Two, he was still himself. When the hallways of their home had started to fill with the Seekers' silvery sleeping gas, Marc had known the aliens were trying to capture his people alive. But he was awake and unless the Soul in him was extremely lazy, Marc's mind and body were still his own.

His first two facts led Marc to his third realization. If he had not been disposed of or had a Soul inserted, what had happened? Why had the Seekers stopped what was clearly their goal to wipe out his little band of rebels. The fact Marc and the others had survived, indeed thrived, in a city settled by the Souls had always been a metaphorical poke in the aliens' eye. Ever since their rescue mission to the Administration Building two months ago the Seekers had been tearing through the city and the surrounding country hunting for them. The Seekers tolerance, if they ever had any, of his people existence at an end.

If had not been for the help from Long Rivers and Bright Moon they would have been inevitably caught. Marc seized on the idea, Bright Moon must have been able to get the Seekers to stop. Thinking of blonde haired Seeker brought a smile to Marc's lips. It still was a marvel to Marc how only a few months ago the two of them had been bitterest of enemies. They had been through so much, their relationship growing from hate to love. Even while others of his little family still disliked the Seeker and a few openly disapproved of his relationship, Bright Moon had sworn to protect them.

As if conjured from Marc's reminiscing the door to the examination room opened, and Bright Moon on Fallen Snow marched in from the outside hall. Flanking her were two stern looking male Seekers, both of whom were a good head taller than her honey blonde hair in it's always present ponytail. They closed the door and stood guard as she approached him.

A big sigh of relief came from Marc as she stopped before him. A cautious smile worked its way onto his face, and he said, "I'd jump up and hug you, but I'm kind of tied up at the moment."

She remained silent as she gazed at him steadily. After a few seconds when the blonde had not changed her stance Marc's smile faded. "Okay, how about we start with 'Hi, how's your day going?"
Still she did not say anything or move. Marc was finding her stare to be a little unnerving. He had seen any number of expressions on Bright Moon's face before. Calm and peaceful, not unlike many of the other Souls. Irritated and annoyed, with the emotions usually directed at him. Happy, her smile lighting up her face in delight. Grief, her heartbreaking sobs as he held her. But now her face contained something Marc had not seen before, it was neither angry nor happy. Her lips were drawn into a thin line, her blue eyes cold and distant. Marc finally settled on the best description for this new Bright Moon…Aloof.

Yes, everything in her face and body language displayed detachment and indifference to him. As if Marc was simply a slightly noteworthy bug to be cataloged and discarded without hardly a thought. Marc broke their staring contest and glanced to the two guards in the room and then back to Bright Moon. "Alright," he said slowly, "what's going on here?"

She spoke, but not to Marc. Turning to the two large Seekers at the door she said, "This was a mistake. There is nothing for me to learn from this encounter." Her words were cold and professional.

She began to turn when Marc interrupted her loudly. "Bright Moon, what the hell are you playing at!? If I'm still breathing, you must have stopped the other Seekers. Made some sort of deal, brokered a truce. Why won't you talk to me?"

With her back to him, Marc heard her speak in the same dispassionate tone. "I wanted to know what type of emotional reaction this body would have to your presence."

"What the hell?" breathed Marc as his face screwed up in confusion. An icy fear began to grip his heart. Was it all a lie? Had Bright Moon carried out the greatest of deceptions on him? Carefully manipulating Marc until he had lowered his defenses and let her get in close to him and his people. Marc had always prided himself on seeing through the Seekers' lies and manipulations. Their traps had worked by giving people what they wanted to hear. Lies orchestrated to get you to trust them and then make it easy and safe for your capture and insertion.

Anger stewed in Marc's chest and the apparent betrayal. But her apparent duplicity had a flaw. Bright Moon had many opportunities to catch them all. Safely and efficiently, without calling down an entire army. Was it to gain information about Ian's and Nate's hidden enclaves? Possibly, but the occasions to do so had come and gone without a hint of treachery. Unless Bright Moon had changed her mind, gone back on her promise. Decided the Souls were right along and Humanity must be destroyed.

"Why?" It came out of his mouth as a half-sob of despair.

Bright Moon resumed her exit out of the room without answering Marc. He followed her as she moved, a gut wrenching pain in his chest. She was almost to the entrance when he saw it. Reaching for the doorknob her hand missed as if used to having a longer range. It was subtle, her movement could be almost called clumsy as if her body was unfamiliar to her. Her walk just a little too slow, the swing of her arms slightly too stiff.

If had not been for hearing Wanda's story about her body swapping Marc likely would not have put it together. For as much as he understood Souls to be the small silver creature tied to the brain of their hosts he was human and thought the body as an absolute. Not something one could change like putting on new clothes. The reality of taking the being who was Bright Moon on Fallen Snow out of woman before him and replacing it with another was not a concept Marc's human mind so readily grasped.

The door was opening and whoever was in Bright Moon's host body was almost through the
opening. Even as the realization was taking hold in Marc, his mouth was already opening. One desperate final attempt. "You're not Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. Who are you?"

The person at the door stopped. This time she did turn around to face him when she spoke. "Perceptive. You are more intelligent than you appear."

Marc was more than a little surprised his last ditched effort had worked. He mentally forced his mind into gear. "I'm flattered…I think. Where's Bright Moon?"

The stranger paused, for a split second a more familiar look was on the blonde woman's face. Uncertainty. It vanished just as fast as it appeared. His worry for himself and his people momentarily thrown off, Marc experienced a strong jab of fear for the Soul named Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. "Please," he pleaded with the unknown Seeker, "is she alright? Is she safe?"

"Strange, she asked almost the same of you. I am coming to the conclusion your feelings for each other might be genuine," said the unidentified Seeker dryly.

Marc was unable to keep the alarm out of his voice, "You didn't hurt her, did you?"

"Of course not," said the nameless Seeker. Her voice was finally gaining some of Bright Moon's more familiar exasperation when speaking with Marc. "We do not harm each other. We do not punish ones who make a transgression. When one of us makes a mistake we all endeavor to help the misguided individual."

"Okay," said Marc slowly. "But…umm…you didn't answer my question."

The Seeker frowned. "Yes, I did."

"No, you didn't."

"I explained that the Soul Bright Moon on Fallen Snow is not being harmed. Your question is answered," responded the Seeker.

"I asked if she was alright," clarified Marc. "Nothing you just said leads me to believe she is."

The blonde woman cocked her head. Another familiar body movement of Bright Moon's or was the gesture part of the Human host? Marc was not sure there was a way to know. "You did this," accused the Seeker, "all the time with Bright Moon. You would argue with her over some minor point. Running your words around in circles. I don't understand why she put up with it."

Marc felt a genuine smile form. "I know, drove Bri nuts. But then she always had a good come back. Liked that about her."

"Nor did she care for your nickname for her," said the Seeker with a growing confusion on her face. "But then why..." she trailed off as it became apparent the Soul in her body was reviewing memories.

Seemingly lost in the recollection of Bright Moon's past Marc tried another question at the unknown Seeker. "Who are you?" When she did not reply Marc tried his best to shrug in his restraints. "Better than me calling, 'Hey you.'"

The Seeker blinked and then straightened. Pulling back from the door she approached him and said directly, "I am Seeker Sage of Tides."
Storms had passed through Chicago the previous day and rain had soaked the city. Rainwater collected by thousands of unnoticed storm drains pooled the deluge into the hidden sewage beneath the city. The water swept away to be cleaned and processed by water treatment plants far outside the city limits. In the tunnels the water had receded, but the runoff had left the sewage systems damp and slimy.

Cold, dirty water swirled around Wanda's feet as she listlessly trudged through the tunnel. She barely felt the chilly water in her soaked shoes. Having given up hours ago of trying to keep herself clean, she was now covered head to toe with muck and grime. She assumed she must smell horrible, but her nose had been assaulted by so many unpleasant odors during her time down here it was impossible for her to tell. Not that any of her companions were any better off. Their desperate trek from the Hotel Rose had left them all exhausted and filthy.

Wanda put all her meager energy into trying to keep up with the others, not daring to think about what had happened to the others at the hotel. About what had happened to Ian…'NO!' Her mental shout forcefully pushed the thought away. If she spent even a moment think about what had become of her Ian, an all-encompassing fear would find her, and she would freeze to the spot. Instead, she again focused on those in front of her.

Kate was first in line. The young woman a tight ball of tension as she had led their little party deep into the tunnels under the city. Annie followed next, holding a lightly snoring Alexis. The little girl had cried for her mother and father so hard she eventually wore herself into exhaustion. Paul, Nancy, and Greg came after the two women and child. All of them rendered mute from the shock of the attack.

Mia walked a short distance behind the others, leading Wanda and Healer Long Rivers. Neither Soul had wanted to be a part of the front group, an unspoken agreement between the two to not further trouble the Human refugees. Having the most difficulty with navigating the barely lit and confusing maze of tunnels. Slowest and the noisiest they trailed behind the others until Mia had taken pity on the two Souls and helped them catch up with the others.

"Like this," whispered Mia to Wanda and Long Rivers as she pressed her foot down against the curved surface of the tunnel's floor. She balanced for a split second, her weight held between her new step and her previous, judging if the ground would support her weight. Very useful when almost every surface in the passageway was slick from the brackish water.

"Mia, I can't do that," responded Wanda in an utterly exhausted voice. Of all the escapees, she had experienced the most trouble. She repeated slipped and fallen in this dark labyrinth. Her hands covered with cuts and bruises.

The girl was unsympathetic. "Mia smaller than you are Wanda. If I can do it, so can you."

"Perhaps I could carry you, Wanderer," came Long Rivers' weary voice from beside the struggling little blonde woman.

At the thought of being carried along like Alexis, Wanda forced her aching body to straighten. She closed her eyes tight and pulled strength from her time with Mel in the desert. She had survived that wilderness with the baking hot sun, and she would survive this underground nightmare. The faintest of smiles crossed her lips, and she blinked her eyes open. "No," she replied to the Healer,
"it is alright. I've made more difficult journeys than this. I will manage."

From the front of the line, Kate called out, "The three of you shut up. I need to listen." Everyone fell silent as Kate crouched down to the floor of the tunnel. She cocked her head, her ears primed to hear even the smallest of sounds. After a few seconds of this she pushed herself back to a standing position.

"There's someone down past the next junction point. Who knows how many." Kate's words came out in a tight, angry vent of frustration.

"Mia, can you tell if they are Souls?" asked Wanda. Hoping the girl's strange ability to detect her people at a distance could tell them if the unknown party were more escapees or Seekers.

Mia focused for a moment, her eyes going distant, but then shook her head. "Too far and you're too close. You screw up my Soul radar."

"Of course they're Souls," interrupted Kate angrily. "No one else made it out of the hotel." For more than twelve hours, the nine of them had played a nerve-wracking game of cat and mouse with the Seekers. Kate and the others knew these tunnels like the back of their hand, but the Seekers had the advantage with their greater numbers. Not risking putting themselves into the maze of passageways under the city, they had sought to blockade every exit and every major junction in hopes of pinning down the fugitives.

"What are our options?" inquired Paul as he took their impromptu stop as a chance to rest by leaning against the curved wall.

Greg's answer to his father was flat with defeat. "We can head north, try and get out down by Lake Michigan. But you just know the Seekers are going to be camped out by Lakefront Trail."

Nancy spoke up, "What about the Water Tower?" asked Nancy, referring to Chicago's century-old pumping station in the center of the city.

"That's no good," came back soft Paul's reply. "Way too many Souls around there. Someone will notice us and then call the Seeker cavalry."

Annie shifted the sleeping Alexis in her arms. She had carried the child for a long time and seemed on the brink of collapsing under the weight. Seeing her struggles, Paul pushed himself away from the wall. The older man scooped up Alexis smoothly and let Annie take a minute to rest. Drained of her responsibility to the girl, Annie's slumped to the floor of the tunnel. Oblivious to the smelling water swirling around her.

"We can't stay down here," said Annie in a near croak. "We need food, water, and a little bit of soap." She weakly laughed at her last item.

Surveying the weary Humans, Long Rivers cleared his throat and asked, "M…May I make a suggestion?"

Kate eyed the Soul for a long moment. She made her one-word answer in a near growl. "What?"

Long Rivers shrank back at Kate vehemence but quickly rallied to explain. "Can we make it to Memorial Hospital? I know you had a way into the hospital at one time. The Seekers sealed it off but if you can get us close I think I could get you into the building unseen." His words were calm and confident.

Greg shot up, his voice rising in incredulity. "You want to take us where your kind systematically
inserted you little buggers into Humans? Are you crazy?"

"Please," pleaded the Healer, "I can hide you there. Give you some type of sanctuary."

"How long could you possibly do that before one of the other Healers finds out?" argued Paul. "Besides the Seekers likely know about your involvement. They will be looking for you as well as us."

Long Rivers nodded wearily but continued to make his case. "Yes, that is true. But I believe you would find some of the Healers at the hospital sympathetic to your plight. Many of them remember what you did for us during the plague."

Paul's face was still skeptical. Drawn in tight lines of worry. But there was a hint of hope in his eyes. "The Seekers would not attack?"

Wanda shook her head with light exasperation. "The Seekers would never threaten a place of healing." She liked Long Rivers' idea and wanted to sway the survivors to this course of action. But Wanda got no further when Kate suddenly rounded on her, outraged.

"I think," spat Kate as she marched towards the two Souls, "it's about time you two drop the fantasy that you Souls are all kindness and peace. That when push comes to shove, your kind are just as cruel and violent as any Human!"

Coming to a stop right in front of Wanda and Long Rivers, Kate glared wordlessly at the two Souls. Both of them cowered before the angry Human. Her accusation hung in the air for long seconds, and no one said a word. Finally, Wanda, with her head bowed, responded in a soft whisper, "You are right, Kate. We...can be cruel. In the hotel I've never seen Seekers act like that...like they desired to cause pain."

"You mean you didn't want to see it," replied Kate with a hiss of quiet fury.

Wanda's body further wilt before Kate's righteous rage. "Yes," came her barely audible one-word answer.

But Wanda's acknowledgment did little to abate Kate's anger. "We should have never trusted that bitch, Bright Moon. I bet she sold us out to her pals." She paced back and forth in the narrow tunnel, her feet splashing irritably in the murky stream of water.

There was nothing Wanda, or Long Rivers could offer to calm Kate down. But Greg unexpectedly rose to defend Seeker Bright Moon. "I don't know about that, Kate. Nancy and I would not have gotten out if wasn't for Bright Moon. She jumped right out in front of a bunch of charging Seekers."

Nancy nodded silently in agreement with her boyfriend.

Kate stopped pacing and turned to the couple. She blew out a fuming breath, knocking away her floppy bangs that had begun to droop as she ranted. "It was a trick," she said with a tired sigh.

"They shot her," said Nancy in a nearly toneless voice. "I saw her fall."

"More tricks," replied Kate stubbornly.

"I don't think Bright Moon sold you out," Wanda said carefully, trying to keep her voice neutral. Kate turned her reproachful eyes to the Soul but did not say anything. Wanda glanced at the other Humans as she continued. "I know you don't like Bright Moon very much. You have a lot of reasons to hate her. But she did promise to protect you. And I know she takes that pledge very seriously."
"Because all Souls are honest and good?" asked a cynically sarcastic Kate.

"No, that's not why," replied Wanda as she ignored the young woman's mockery. "She had something very bad happen to her when she was young. It changed how she saw herself, lead her to become a Seeker. Making a promise to protect someone means everything to her."

Paul frowned as he shifted Alexis's sleeping form in his arms. "But didn't Bright Moon grow up on another planet? That ice world of yours?"

"Mist World," confirmed Wanda.

"What happened to her?" asked a suddenly curious Nancy.

Wanda wavered for a moment before replying. "It's complicated…and she told me in confidence." This took Humans and even Long Rivers by surprise, it was very uncommon for Souls to keep secrets from each other.

"We're getting off the point," interjected Kate. Her anger was slowly draining away, there was little she could do with it that would be helpful. Instead, she channeled the wrecking ball of agitated energy bashing around inside her mind into getting their small band of survivors safe. "Right now we don't have many options. We can try to wait out the Seekers down here, make for Long River's hospital, or try to come up with something else."

"There is no way we can hang on long enough for the Seekers to give up," answered Paul. "They can wait us out till we're starving to death."

"Well I don't see running off to hide in a Soul hospital as any type of improvement," put in Greg.

Lost in thought while the Humans argued what to do, Wanda tasseled some of her long blonde hair. At this point, it was so matted with dirt it had lost much of its springy bounce. She was struggling, images of Ian continued to push into her mind. The last time she was with him, their final kiss, and his wordless goodbye. He had sacrificed himself to save them, to save her. If Ian was alive, if any of them were alive, they were going to be turned into hosts for Seekers. The very idea tore into her small chest as if her heart was being ripped out.

Not until Mia lightly touched her on the arm and said softly, "Don't cry Wanda," did she feel the tears running down her cheeks. Wanda blinked several times to clear her vision. Mia stood before her looking tired and more than a little scared. The girl who had endured who-knew-what terrors from the Humans of the Facility and Seekers only sought to hurt the ones she loved. What were her people turning into when the Seekers themselves became as warlike as the Humans they insisted were cruel and dangerous.

Wanda's words came out in a whisper, she was scarcely aware she was speaking out loud, "I'm getting them back."

Mia's eyes widened, surprise mixed with a touch excitement. "Yeah?"

Certainty rose in Wanda. "Yes. I going to find them and save them."

Around her, the conversations about what to do came to an abrupt stop. "Wanda, what did you say?" asked Kate.

Wanda steeled herself. What would come would not be easy. She had only the barest of an idea of an idea on how she could rescue the Humans. But she had done it before when she saved Jamie. She would find the way.
"Kate, you and the others may do as you want," announced Wanda as her voice began to grow determined. "But I am getting our people back from the Seekers."

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"You'll forgive me, but I've never been in a female Human before," said Seeker Sage of Tides as she walked along in Bright Moon's body. Her body moved with just a hint of stiffness from its new owner. "I had grown used to moving in a male body. It takes a little while to adjust."

Following behind Sage, Marc gave a tired shrug of his shoulders. "Yeah…I can't really relate."

The Seeker stopped and turned Bright Moon's head to face him. The Seekers guarding Marc also stopped. Marc found it impossible to see Sage's use of the body before him as anything other than a hijacking. The Seeker had insisted Bright Moon was safe in a cryotank, but would not give any more details. Now Sage of Tides was leading him to see his captured people. Marc still did not know what the Seekers wanted from him, why he was awake and remained free. A gaping hole of fear had hollowed him out and he muddled senses could feel little else.

"I suppose not," replied Sage with the faintest of smiles. She resumed walking and Marc's escort of three burly male Seekers forced him to march along.

Marc's mind sought a distraction from his ongoing fright. Even if he was in control of nothing, he was going to act like flew above it all. He cleared his throat to get Sage's attention. "So how about you tell Hardrock, Coco, and Joe here," he said indicating the three Seekers guarding him, "to give me a little slack. It's not like I'm going to run off." He underscored his point by lifting his hands still in handcuffs while grinning at the Seeker.

Sage studied him shrewdly for a moment. The look was a strange mix on Bright Moon's face. An intensity Marc had seen before with Bright Moon, but something else. Something old and ancient stared at him from the silver behind those blue eyes.

"No," said Sage quietly but firmly, "you will not do this. We are not friends. You do not fool me with your jokes or your friendly smiles. You are terrified. And right now I want the truth from you. No lies or play acting."

Marc felt the bottom drop out beneath him. He gulped as Sage of Tides stared him down. His breath came faster as his heart began to hammer in his chest. Weekly he said, "What do you want from me?"

"Bright Moon on Fallen Snow," said Sage as they again began to walk along, "has presented us with a bit of a problem. By all appearances, she was a successful and diligent Seeker. A credit to her calling. But then she was discovered defending wild Humans."

"Humans, I might add," continued the Seeker as she eyed Marc questionably, "she was tasked with tracking down and capturing. At first we thought her a counterfeit Seeker. A reclaimed Human with the real Bright Moon lobotomized. But all our tests showed the Soul Bright Moon was intact and healthy in her host. This rather stunning revelation leads us to the uncomfortable truth that Bright Moon was freely helping and supporting you."

"If you're inside her body you know why she was working with us," stated Marc.
Sage of Tides made a dismissive wave of her hand. With a growing bemusement in her voice, she answered Marc. "Inside her body? You mean the host body…You seem almost willfully ignorant of what we truly are. I could no more be in the Soul Bright Moon than I could be inside a rock. I exist in her former host body. And, yes, through this body I can see her memories, know her actions. But I am not privy to the Soul known as Bright Moon on Fallen Snow's thoughts."

Sage paused, her eyes again going distant with the look of internal contemplation. "I see the decisions Bright Moon made that led to your 'alliance.' But they are irrational. Also, I don't understand why you, Marc Walters, made peace with her. Why you…" and here Sage's voice grew unsteady with emotion "why you cared for her…"

Suddenly the Seeker pushed in close to Marc, her eyes intense, the silver in them seeming to flare with intensity. "Do you love the Soul Bright Moon on Fallen Snow or just this body? Did you deceive her, manipulate her emotions to bend her to your will?"

Feeling like he had been slapped in the face Marc fought back to scream in frustration. "Why then," he bit out, "don't you just jump in my skull and find out?"

"I very well may do just that," replied the Seeker as she pulled away from Marc with a frown. "But there are two reasons I have not," she explained. "For one, I believe you would be a very resistant host. You would fight me at every turn, not something I think either one of us would enjoy." And Marc visibly nervously, began to tremble at the idea.

With a sigh Sage of Tides said, "Which leads me to my next reason. Bright Moon insisted that you were not our enemy. She was willing to give up everything for you. So I would understand how a Human and Soul could claim they love each other. If that is even possible."

It took long moments for Sage's words to sink in. Marc found his mouth dry, he realized he was sweating profusely. Licking his lips, he asked, "What…What am I supposed to say to you? How do I even answer that?"

"I…I don't know," admitted Sage of Tides with her gaze growing confused. For a brief moment in Marc's eyes, he was standing in front of Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. But then it was gone almost as quickly as it came and the stranger Sage of Tides was back. The Seeker shook her strongly, trying to force her mind clear of troubling thoughts.

Sage twisted away from Marc and they continued with a renewed pace down the hallway. Evidently unsettled by reliving memories of Bright Moon's time with Marc. As they turned the corner, they entered a corridor with a number of plain white doors with a single small square glass window. Both the door and glass looked bulky and very solid in Marc's opinion. Reinforced to withstand a great deal of damage before breaking. All the doors had massive locks on them, complicated devices dedicated to containing whatever was in the room. Everything looked completely brand new as if they had just been installed. Marc realized it was a makeshift prison.

Unexpectedly Sage began speaking again. "Here are your people, at least the ones we were able to capture."

Marc wanted to run to the cells, to see his friends, but his escorting Seekers held him fast. He could barely get the words out. "Are they alright?"

"I…I don't know," admitted Sage of Tides with her gaze growing confused. For a brief moment in Marc's eyes, he was standing in front of Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. But then it was gone almost as quickly as it came and the stranger Sage of Tides was back. The Seeker shook her strongly, trying to force her mind clear of troubling thoughts.

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Sage of Tides spoke calmly, almost casually. "We captured many of them without issue. But some of them resisted. They are in various states of recovery." Coming to a stop before one of the white doors Sage elaborated, "This one fought viciously. He was gravely injured before he was subdued."
With his guards letting him pull away, Marc looked the thick glass to see an unmoving figure lying on a bed. It was hard to see who it was as the person was covered in thick white fabric-like material. To Marc, it looked like the washed-out cloth was subtly moving back and forth like it was slowly kneading dough. Whatever it was, encased the body from head to toe. But there was a familiar tuft of black hair sticking out at the top of the enshrouding material.

"Ian," whispered a shocked Marc.

"Yes," confirmed Sage. "Mr. O'Shea suffered extensive burns when he ignited the natural gas line in the kitchen area of your hiding space."

Marc's legs were having trouble keeping him upright as he staggered away from the white door. One of the Seekers behind him grabbed him from behind to keep him upright. Marc barely felt it from cold numbing fear consuming his body. "Ian is going to be alright, isn't he?"

"As I said, his body was severely damaged," replied Sage dispassionately. "Even our medicine has limitations." When Sage saw the stricken expression on Marc's face, her tone softened slightly. "I believe the Healers are optimistic about his recovery."

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Marc. He dreaded the answer, but he had to know.

Sage's response was mild like she was speaking about something as mundane as the weather. "None of you would be suitable hosts. Far too dangerous to any of our kind. But the information they have on your and other Human resistant cells will be invaluable. Insertions will begin as soon as the Healers have cleared them."

"No!" cried Marc. At his shout, Marc felt the Seekers holding tighten their grip. But Marc continued to struggle. "Sage, you don't need to do this! Please! If you actually see Bright Moon's memories you know we're not a threat. We stopped the plague! We stopped Adams!"

But Sage shook her head slowly, almost sadly. "The risk is too great. Even if you speak the truth, it is far too dangerous to let you continue to run amok in the city."

Anger surged in Marc. "Why the hell does your kind have to be so damn afraid of everything that isn't you!?"

"It's not fear," snapped Sage. "We provide safety…"

"The hell it isn't!" shouted Marc cutting Sage off. "If you Souls aren't running a host body, you're terrified of it. Why must you try to control everything!"

At Marc's outburst Sage actually recoiled, momentarily intimidated. But it was short lived. Her jaw tightened in her own growing anger. "I've seen the carnage you Humans can inflict. Of course, we are terrified of your people. I am protecting my kind from a grave threat."

Marc saw the rising furor in Sage's body. Saw how her hands were balled into fists, the flush in her cheeks. Just like when he first dealt with Bright Moon. Maybe Sage was not any different from Bright Moon. Maybe Sage was not any different from Bright Moon. Maybe the woman before him, the human, still had some sort of influence. Had not some of the Souls he had met admitted to as much from their hosts? Perhaps it was impossible to know, but Marc found his rage draining away.

"You know Bright Moon said the same thing – that she wanted to protect her people," said Marc as his voice grew calm and he stopped struggling against the Seekers holding him back. "Want to know why Bright Moon and I are together? Why she sided with us?"
Sage of Tides blinked, confused by Marc sudden change of behavior. "Why?" she asked in almost a whisper.

Marc's answer was wistful, perhaps in defeat or maybe in wild optimistic hope. "Because she stopped being afraid. Because she trusted me and I trusted her. That's why you can't comprehend what she did. Because you're scared. And you can insert yourself in me and my people all you want, but you still won't understand a damn thing until you stop being afraid."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. Real life issues have soaked up my time. I'm back and let's see if I can't get a few chapters kicked out.
I'm using elements of Jodi's backstory from the story 'What the Hell, People?' by Spaztronaut. The story was published on FF.Net. The author has graciously given permission for me to use Jodi's and Kyle's past created in the story. I really like the story and encourage anyone who likes the character Kyle to read it.

'They must have given me some sort of drug,' thought Jodi as she sat on the narrow cot. She was in what she assumed was a hospital waiting room. On one side of the room was a disorganized pile of chairs and tables you would typically find in such a place. They had been pushed out of the way to make room for rows of beds making an improvised sleeping area. The other side of the room contained a cramped reception desk with stacks of unused paperwork. Facing the closed and locked door to the outside, she waited for someone to come. She had been brought to this empty room hours ago and she was not sure what these people wanted from her. Still confused and bewildered, Jodi wished they had left some of the typical magazines usually found in waiting rooms as a distraction.

Then again, maybe she did not. Anything here would be written by the Souls. What type of magazines did the parasites read? What had her own parasite liked to read? Her memories were still a little hazy in Jodi's recovered mind, but she did recall it had loved some kind of light-hearted trashy romance novel. Something Jodi would never have touched in a million years.

Jodi felt a quiver of nausea rise in her stomach as she thought about Sunlight Passing through the Ice. The strange alien creature which had taken over her body years ago. Who had stolen her life and with the rest of it's silvery relatives had taken nearly everyone else on the planet.

Tracing the back of her neck, Jodi felt the thin scar that marked the parasite's entry into her body. Again her body made a little shudder. But her tiny tremble of fear and disgust was all she felt. It was like all her feelings of anxiety, fear, and doubt were bound in gauze. They were present, but they were padded and protected, softening her brittle emotions. As if her perceptions had been subtly altered.

She had never taken drugs in high school or college, not caring for having her mind and thoughts distorted. Not having much experience with narcotics, Jodi did not have much to compare to. But being drugged was the only explanation she could come up with. How else did she explain when the creature which had taken over her body and mind was still in the back of her neck and she was not screaming her head off in panic? She could feel it still inside her, she should have been horrified and yet strangely she was not.

She was still mystified about what exactly had happened to her. Memories of going to visit her Grandparents all those years ago was still fresh in her mind. Of Nana's gentle hug when she met Jodi at the airport. On the way home, Jodi had complained about the ever rising security measures being forced on travelers from the every escalating threats of terrorist. Her grandmother had made a tranquil smile and explained that soon such problems would be gone. At the time Jodi had not understood what she had meant and simply chopped it up to her lovable but doddering old
grandmother's age. But she knew now. Her grandparents were already taken over by the parasites. She had not been in their house more than ten minutes when they had knocked her out and put one of their own kind into her. Then the she was gone, her body and mind no longer her own. By the time the parasite returned to her home in Las Vegas, her mother and father were already taken over. The whole world was soon to follow. Years slowly passed. It was like being shoved into a continuously repeating episode of *Leave it to Beaver*. Life was nothing but big dopey smiles, peace, and utterly boring serenity.

Faces flashed through Jodi's mind, each one evoking a stab of grief. Everyone she knew, all of them occupied by the invaders. Memories of her mother came to her. A sob deep in her chest broke through. 'Oh, mom...' and Jodi felt a tear run down her cheek at the thought of the alien controlling her mother. But her tears did not last long. Jodi had never been one for crying, she did not like feeling so weak. And her misery quickly subsided to a dull ache in her body.

But then came an odd blankness, a sort of a gray blur, in her mind. She remembered living at home and then…waking up in the tent with Jeremy and the two Seekers. How had she gotten from Las Vegas to a farmers market outside LA?

There came a stirring from the hallway and Jodi could hear many footsteps on the polished floor outside. Voices as well, a small chorus of different people speaking. It was hard to make out what was being said as everyone was talking over each other.

"…well what the hell was I supposed to do?" came one voice from the hallway. The speaker's tone was familiar. Jodi was pretty sure it belonged to her rescuer, Jeremy.

Another voice answered Jeremy's question, this one unfamiliar. "Not capture Seekers in a very a public place..."

"Relax, Joe. I had it covered..." said a woman's voice as the footsteps grew louder while Jodi listened.

"…It's not going to last," replied another man with a hard and unkind voice, "we may need to move up our timetable."

The footsteps abruptly stopped outside the door and Jodi heard the jangling of keys. A soft click came from the door as the lock was released. Jodi felt a rise of excitement in her body. Finally something was happening. Maybe whatever she had been given was wearing off.

Four people streamed into the room when the door opened. All of them obviously Human. Not just because of the absence of silver in their eyes but because all of them were in the middle of a heated argument. That was something Jodi’s ears had not heard for a long time in the ever peaceful world of the Souls. And it made Jodi feel like laughing in joy.

"Enough!" commanded the harsh voice, ending all parts of the dispute at once. The severe voice belonged to a tall, narrow-faced man with a very brooding expression on his face. In his hand at his side, Jodi saw the glossy black edge of a small tablet computer. He held the device protectively, with a grip that made it clear the only way you would get it would be over his dead body. Regarding Jodi impassively for a few moments he then turned to Jeremy. "So this is the young lady you got with the remaining Seekers in San Bernardino?"

Jeremy gave Jodi a tentative smile, which she returned almost reflexively. He had a sort of rugged outdoors look to him with his darkened sun tanned skin. He looked like he would be very comfortable in the desolation of a desert or the wildness of a jungle. And Jodi had to admit he was kind of cute.
"Yeah," said Jeremy tentatively. Seemingly trying to be polite while still responding to his evident superior. "Her name is Jodi. Didn't get a last name. While infested she was sitting there with the two remaining Seekers balling her eyes out."

Jodi frowned, growing slight confused. She did not remember any of that happening. "I was…I mean the parasite was crying? Why? I…Don't…"

"It's alright sweetie," said the woman with a slight smile. "First twenty-four hours your memory may have some holes in it. It will all come back." Jodi looked her over. She was maybe in her late forties or early fifties judging from the few delicate wisps of gray standing out in sharp contrast to her raven colored hair. She was little taller than Jodi and perhaps more than a few pounds overweight, but with her piercing blue eyes and an almost feral grin on her face she did not look weak or out of shape. No, she looked strong, sturdy, and ready for anything that came at her.

Seeing Jodi eye her, she twisted a quick pose with her hands on her hips. "Name's Samantha Greer. Do I pass inspection?" she asked. Jodi smiled and nodded. She liked this woman.

Giving Samantha a sour look, the narrow-faced man addressed Jodi. "I'm Director Smith, I'm the one in charge. I've got a few questions for you."

"Alright, fine," replied Jodi with a little bit of heat in her voice. "But before I answer I've got a few questions of my own. Like who the hell are you people? And why did you leave me locked up in here for the past two hours?"

Director Smith's unhappy expression did not improve at Jodi's cross-questioning. She was quickly getting the impression he was not someone to remain patient for very long. Truthfully Jodi realized she did not have a lot of options. She did not want to be obstinate, these people had freed her. "Fine," she said glowering, "what do you want to know?"

Smith turned his tablet around and examined the text on the little screen. "Your parasite's name?"

"Sunlight Passing through the Ice," stated Jodi. She got a flash of memories associated with the name when she said it out loud. The words she spoke were just a rough translation. The real name was originally in another language, something strange, and something not human. Bizarre images of ice and snow trickled through Jodi's mind. Another minor shudder went through her at the alien memories.

Smith did not notice her momentary discomfort, his eyes locked on his miniature computer. He tapped at the screen with his finger in quick jabs as his eyes moved rapidly back and forth over text on the tablet. But Samantha did and sat down next Jodi on her slender bed. She gave Jodi a reassuring smile and took her hand to give it a gentle squeeze.

Jodi began to realize she was seeing memories of the parasite still stuck in her head. Of a previous life it had stolen. The parasite had lived in a creature with four arms and thick white fur…a Bear. Indeed to Jodi's mind it did look a bit like a polar bear. It had lived in cities made of massive towers of ice and rock on a frozen alien world. So very strange and yet it was also touchingly beautiful.

Interrupting Jodi's private musings Smith asked another question. "Was anyone with you at the Farmer's Market? Is there anyone who will come looking for you?"

Jodi shook her head uncertainly, truthfully she was not sure. She was having trouble remembering when Jeremy spoke up. "I didn't see anyone else there. And none of the parasites came up when we brought in the ambulance. Even if there were someone looking for her, they'd go to the local
Seekers.” He smiled wolfishly. "And we can handle it from there."

Smith’s frown, already prominent, deepened as he looked over the screen. Without looking up or responding to Jeremy, he said, "Jodi, what's your full name?"

"Jodi A Keller," replied Jodi dryly. "I'm twenty-seven. If you give me a moment I think I can remember my driver's license number if that would help," she quipped sarcastically.

But Directory Smith, or whatever he called himself, plainly ignored Jodi’s disdainful answer. Still looking unhappy he turned and made for the door. "Joe, with me," said Smith as he opened the door, "We need to get a hold of Williams." The other man who had remained silent while in the room turned and followed after Smith.

"Wait," said Samantha. "What do you want me to do with her? We can't leave Jodi here." She rose from the cot and pointed at Smith, who was almost out the door. "And I'm not babysitting. You've given me plenty of work."

Smith made the smallest of shrugs as he was leaving. "Put her to work then," he said. The man name Joe passed Smith and exited down the hallway. Smith hesitated for a brief moment outside the door. "But keep her on this floor," he said sternly and then was gone.

Staring after Smith, Jodi found she had finally lost her very last bit of patience. Turning to Jeremy and Samantha she nearly screamed in frustration, "Could somebody tell me what the hell is going on?"

"I'm sorry, hon," said Samantha as she sat down again on the little cot. It squeaked a little under their combined weight. "Bringing you back wasn't part of the plan and Smith is a little ticked off. As you can see, he's a bit of an ass. But he's also under a lot of pressure. We all are, to be honest." She smiled a rueful little smile and said, "Part of the deal when you're a member of the new Human Resistance."

Jodi digested this nugget of information and then asked in a softer voice, "What happened to me?"

This time Jeremy spoke up and he began to enthusiastically explain her miraculous recovery. "You were exposed to an advanced neurological treatment we call the CURE. It suppresses the parasite controlling you and then jump starts a neural biochemical reaction in the frontal lobe of your brain. With the net effect of getting your consciousness back in control of your body." Now he smiled broadly at her and said, "At least that was spiel I was given when I woke up a few days ago. To put it in laymen's terms, we shut the wretched worms down and turn their own game against them."

"You were like me?" said Jodi as her hand went to her neck, her hand brushing aside the locks of hair to trace her insertion scar.

"Yep," said Jeremy with a shaky sigh. "I was Seeker Bending Reeds. The bastard used my body to hunt down free humans and turn them into more hosts for their kind."

"And I was Healer Azure Waves," added Samantha with a roll of her eyes. "Got to be the most idiotic name I've ever heard of," she muttered while staring off into space. Her eyes glazed over and she seemed momentarily lost in her memories.

"So…what are we doing? I mean this CURE thing sounds fantastic," said Jodi as a giddy excitement began to take hold in her body. The possibilities of what could be done. She could save Mom and Dad, all their neighbors, even her Grandparents.

Jeremy cleared his throat, the look on his face brought Jodi's budding plans to a halt. His darkly
tanned face was one of regretful apology as he sat down on a cot opposite her. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "You want to run off with a bottle of CURE and go free your family or friends, right?"

"Yeah my parents. I mean, don't you want to?" asked Jodi with rising disbelief Jeremy or anyone for that matter would not want to free their loved ones.

"Of course I do," replied Jeremy with a voice quickly becoming mournful. "I've got an older brother and my dad. And they're still infected."

Jodi jumped off the bed. "Why?" she angrily demanded. "Why haven't you freed them?"

"Jodi," broke in Samantha. Jodi turned around to face the woman still sitting on the narrow bed. She was surprised as the woman's previous good humor was completely gone, replaced with a rising plea in the woman's blue eyes. "Think about it!" she said urgently, "What will the parasites do when they learn what we're up to?"

"They'll send in hundreds if not thousands of Seekers to stomp us out," said Jeremy in answer to Samantha's question. "Trust me, I know what I'm talking about," added the former Seeker while lightly tapping his head with his index finger with a knowing sad smile.

"We have to be smart and we have to be careful," explained Samantha. "Right now we're still small and vulnerable. Jeremy and the others are quietly pulling in the Seekers from the surrounding area. I'm making inroads with the Healers. Converting them back to regular human beings. But we can't just be grabbing anyone. You know how tight-knit these worms are."

Jodi saw the stark logic of what they were saying. The need for security and caution. "But our families?"

"No one is saying we won't free them in time," Jeremy earnestly replied. "The more people we free, the stronger we get." He nodded slowly and added, "We won't be hiding forever. You'll get your chance to save your parents."

Sitting back down, Jodi felt her earlier joy fade away. She sat glumly on the cot thinking over everything that had happened to her. Both Jeremy and Samantha waited patiently. Apparently they had given this explanation to others before. Now freed it looked like Jodi had a new job, a member of the Human Resistant. What did she know about fighting in a resistance army? How could they possibly take on a whole world full of aliens? Yet she felt a growing confidence in her body, a certainty that they would win. Any fears or doubts she had just…faded away.

As Jodi sat, contemplating her new and strange life she had been thrust into a thought occurred to her. While helping her family might be the time being beyond her grasp, there was something she could do. Looking over to Samantha, who sat waiting with an understanding smile, Jodi said, "I still have this thing, this Sunlight Passing through whatever in me. I don't care if it's asleep or not. I want it out."

Both Jeremy and Samantha traded a pained expression at her request. Jodi sighed, "What now?"

Samantha began with a tentative smile. "Jodi, I know it's not ideal, but for right now we're leaving them in."

"What?! Why?"

"Because for the time being we still need them," intoned Jeremy solemnly. "The CURE effectively makes them dormant in your body. While still connected to us we can access all their memories, all
their knowledge. Information on the worlds they've been to, understanding of their technology, how to walk among them without giving ourselves away. Right now we need every advantage we can get."

"So you've still got yours in your head?" asked Jodi. Again she thought she should feel horrified by this fact but instead she felt oddly at ease with the situation. It did not matter, the alien could no longer hurt her.

Both Samantha and Jeremy nodded together. Together they held an expression which was sympathetic but also resolved. Apparently, they believed this was for the best. Jodi was not sure what she could learn from the previous lives her parasite had lived, it had been something like an artist. As a Bear it had carved intricate patterns in blocks of ice for reasons she did not readily comprehend. Nevertheless she could see the great advantage of knowing all the Souls' secrets, had not the parasites done the exact same thing to Humanity when they invaded? Jodi felt herself reluctantly accepting the need to keep the wretched thing in her head.

With a resigned sigh Jodi asked, "I assume leaving them in isn't the long term plan? Please say yes."

Samantha nodded with a smile. "Trust me hon, as soon as we don't need to lay low you'll be the first one I pull out. We'll toss it away and then you'll never have to worry about these miserable things again." She checked her watch and then briskly stood up. Petitioning Jodi, she said, "Now I've got a ton of work ahead of me and not nearly enough hours in the day. You ready to help?"

Jeremy's smile from the neighboring bed was cordial and kind. "I know it's like waking up in a nightmare. You're right to want the thing that stole your life gone." His face hardened as he continued to speak. "But trust me, your fear of these parasites will fade. They may have the numbers, but they're weak. Without a host, they're nothing, less than nothing."

What they said felt right, reflected Jodi. There was no need to be afraid, no need to doubt the righteousness of their cause. The evil these 'Souls' created had to be stopped. She would be strong so she could save the others. Pushing herself off the bed, Jodi nodded firmly to Samantha and Jeremy. "I'm ready. I've been asleep for the better part of the past six years. It's far past time I woke up."

Chapter End Notes

Fear not, Sunny isn't gone for good. And Jodi's reactions may seem a little strange, but that's on purpose. She's not quite herself anymore...
Determined

Steaming hot water sprayed down onto Kate Gonzales. The falling water beaded on her dusky skin and soaked into her limp midnight black hair. For a long time, she held herself motionless under the scalding downpour as her skin gradually began to warm. Soon streaming rivulets were running down her body, washing away mud and filth, while slowly soothingly her aching muscles. She steadied herself from the strong spray by leaning forward and placing her hands on the shower wall. The tension in her neck from long hours of constant stress began to fade as she remained under the shower.

Using a bar of soap, Kate worked at cleaning her skin and then on to washing her hair with a bottle of shampoo. Once she was rinsed clean, she remained stock still under the shower. The steady din of the falling water drowned every other sound and left Kate in a small bubble of isolation. She was safe in this tiny shower stall filled with a steamy haze from the hot water. It was an illusion of course. So easy to momentarily push away her gnawing fears. Kate so desperately wanted to pretend the last day was nothing but a nightmare.

But it was not and Kate reminded herself she could not stay here hiding. With a sudden jerk on the knob controlling the shower, Kate cut the water supply and the cleansing water cut off abruptly. The drain on the floor gurgled for a few seconds as the remaining puddle at her feet washed away and then went quiet. A soft silence followed while she steadied herself. Then Kate began to move. Exiting from the shower stall, she briskly entered the empty hospital changing room.

During the grueling nightmare of the outbreak a few months before, Kate had not been to this particular changing room in the Northwest Memorial Hospital. But it was seemingly identical to the others in the building. The shower and a rack of clean towels and clothing lay to her right. A small set of green lime lockers on the other side of the room containing the regular street clothes of those working the current morning shift at the hospital. The lockers were so innocuous and unassuming it was easy to forget that each one belonged to a Soul Healer.

Fighting a shiver working up her spine, Kate pulled a towel from a nearby rack and began to dry herself off. She did her best to comb her hair with her fingers. Her thick hair was never easy to manage and her efforts only created a bigger mess on top of her head. She considered the possibility Wanda could get her a comb. Wrapping the towel tight around herself, Kate turned around just in time to see a gray-haired figure enter from the outside.

Kate let out a panicked shriek at the sight of the man and her complete lack of clothes. For the unexpected visitor's part, he jumped back in wild alarm at Kate's cry.

Her heart racing in her chest, Kate gasped out as she took in the silver-haired man who was cowering before her. "Darren!"

"Uh…ummm….ahhh," managed the Healer in a nervous squeak.

"What are you doing!?" demanded Kate in a voice quieter than her previous yell but no less intense.

Darren straightened and made a very shaky sigh. He tried bringing his eyes up to look Kate in the face, but seeing she was only dressed in a towel his lined face rapidly reddened. Hastily he spun around and a mad rush of words came from the Healer while his back was to Kate.

"I'm so sorry…Kate…I didn't mean to scare you…I hadn't realized you were showering…I did not
"Pervert," snapped Kate as she glared at the Healers backside. Her response had Darren's skin on his neck turning an even darker shade of red. Truthfully she was not angry at the invasion of her privacy. Living in their tight-knit community and their less than modern bathroom in their underground hideout had led Kate to get over any shame of her body or silly worries about modesty a long time ago. Instead, her prickly feelings of anger toward Darren stemmed from their last brief meeting.

Twisting back to the nearby shelves Kate pulled out the light baby blue scrubs worn by the Healers and began to dress herself. It was not much to wear, but it was a vast improvement over her filthy clothing. As she pulled the clean cotton shirt on, it's fit was loose on her slim shoulders, she heard Darren warily cleared his throat.

He remained with his back to her, standing awkwardly. "Kate," began the Healer softly, "when I heard you were here I rushed to see you. I want to apologize for when we last met. You stormed off so angry I never had a chance to say I was sorry."

Fully dressed, Kate walked around Darren's unmoving body until she came to his front side. His still ruddy red face was looking down at his shoes, his shoulders sagging, his whole body easily betraying his distress. Despite his body's age, in Kate's opinion he looked a little boy who knew he was about to be scolded by his mother.

"You hurt me," said Kate coldly and she saw Darren flinch at her words. "More than I thought possible. I mean, your kind takes everything from us, more than enough reason to hate you. But then you and I worked together. It felt like we...were a team. We deliver the baby and you Souls make such a big deal about it. Like I'm some hero or something."

Darren brought his gaze up from the floor. With a pained smile he said, "Kate, I think you're incredible. Through all the horrors of pandemic you worked tirelessly."

"Yeah, Yeah," broke in Kate dismissively. "I'm such a great testament to my race. It's all fine and good when I'm helping your kind. But then at the first chance you guys get, you show up with little Sunrise and rub my face in the fact she was inserted with one of you."

She saw Darren's body sag further, a bloom of despair on his face. "I, Blue Waves Dancing, and Many Eyes Seeing never meant to hurt you, Kate. We did not mean to be so callous. It's just the three of us wanted you to share in our joy of her birth. Please believe me." He gestured with a prolonged helpless shrug that was tied to a strained sigh. "I know you see what we did as horrible, but the insertions are necessary for us. Without a host body we die."

Taking a step in closer to Darren Kate grimaced in plaintive hurt. "Is that all I am to you!? Just a body, just something to use and then throw away when done?"

This time the gray-haired Healer did not retreat from Kate's furious words or glare. He stood his ground and faced Kate with a resigned but confident stare. "No, Kate," replied Darren softly, "You're not."

Kate turned away, still fuming. "Doesn't matter," she spat. "Your Seekers have gotten all my people." Her fears began to topple her anger, and her words began to tremble as she continued, "They're going to kill them. Kill my...my...family."

Darren's words were calmer but no less passionate than hers. "Kate, we saw what happened yesterday at the Hotel. The attack. Everyone is talking about it. Many were horrified but what we
saw."

Kate looked up to meet his gaze while blinking back freshly formed tears. "A bunch of hiding monstrous wild Humans?"

"No," answered Darren with a vigorous shake of his head. "We saw Seekers marching in with killing weapons, wrecking the building with explosives. Limp, unconscious bodies that had obviously been beaten being carried away. A pregnant Human being dragged out, screaming in terror for her unborn child."

"Sarah…” gasped Kate. "What happened to her…her baby?"

"I don't know," admitted the Soul gravely, clearly bothered by his lack of knowledge. "They have taken all the prisoners away. The Seekers claim they were acting to protect us from a threat."

"We weren't hurting anyone!" thundered Kate as loud as her lungs would allow.

Darren weathered Kate's outburst as a man might face a hurricane. He clenched his eyes tight and trembled before the angry diminutive woman. Decidedly worried Kate might give into her rage and attack him. When no such blows came, he gingerly opened his eyes and eased his hands up, in a hopefully soothing gesture of patience. "I know, Kate, I know. There are some of us who didn't believe the Seekers' explanation for the attacks. There is much tension and confusion among us."

Hot anger boiled in Kate, but it had nowhere to go. It simply sat and fumed within her small frame. "Well," she said through gritted teeth, "that's great. Your kind are confused and worried, and mine are about to be either killed or turned into hosts. So you'll excuse me if I don't give a damn about your problems."

There was a potent pause between the two, Human and Soul stood staring at each other. Kate's emotions wrecking her from fear and grief while Darren was beset with feelings of guilt and a desire to ease Kate's suffering. But he did not know what to say or do. But their silent stares were abruptly interrupted when the door to the outside opened quickly and Wanda and Long Rivers dashed in.

"Darren what are you doing here? What was that shouting?" queried Long Rivers with faint alarm on his face.

Darren turned to the Healer slowly, his eyes lingering on Kate. "Healer Long Rivers, once you told me about Kate's arrival I came to speak to her. To apologize for our last meeting." He bowed his head sadly. "She is, of course, very upset and worried about her people." With a slight curious glance at Kate he added, "I guess you could say she was venting her anger."

Both Long Rivers and Wanda had already had a chance to clean up and now were dressed in similar scrubs like Kate's. Long Rivers and Wanda nodded in patient agreement with Darren adding, "Yes, I know. I've had more than a few exposures to Miss Gonzales's ire today."

"Oh, you two are just so hysterical," grumbled Kate as she scowled at the two Healers. But she did not give either Soul a chance to reply, instead turning to Wanda. "Okay, so what's the deal here, Wanda? You said your plan needed the Healers and this hospital. How does this stop the Seekers?"

"I need as much support as I can get," answered Wanda with a sympathetic smile focused upon Kate with the hope of calming her down. "This hospital is the best I can do. I had wished to find many more allies for our cause before going public. But the Seekers have forced my hand. I must make do with what I have." Turning to Long Rivers she asked, "You have contacted them?"
Long Rivers nodded gravely. "I have," he said, "but I don't know how many will come." The Healers' eyes became pained as he talked. "This confrontation you intended with the Seekers is something few of us have ever contemplated."

"I know," replied Wanda earnestly. "But it is far past time it is done."

Kate frowned as she tried to make sense of the budding plan being put in motion by the two Souls. "Wanda, what exactly are we doing?"

Wanda glanced between her two Soul brethren before she answered Kate. "You have to understand that the Seekers, in fact all Souls, believe we are acting for the greater good. It is the very core of our existence. I intended to dispute the Seekers claim of your people's threat. I plan on convincing the Seekers they are no longer acting for the greater good."

Folding her arms, Kate gave Wanda a withering glare. "Well, I hope you understand I think all your claims of acting for the greater good is a whole lot of bullshit."

"That may be," replied Wanda evenly. Apparently she did not want to debate Kate right now. "But it is what we believe and I must convince the Seeker what they are doing is wrong."

Kate shifted her gaze between the three Souls and asked sourly, "Is this really going to work?"

"I don't know," Wanda admitted softly. "But I must try."

Darren, who had remained silent but very engrossed in Wanda's discussion of her plans, studied her with a questioning expression on his face. "Wanda, is it?" he asked with a gentle smile. "I'm not quite sure what to make of your plan. Nevertheless I'm pleased to meet you. I had not known Kate had more friends of our kind."

A widening smile grew on Wanda's small oval face when she turned to Darren. "Actually Healer Darren, we've met before."

"We have?" came Darren's surprised response.

"Indeed," replied Wanda as she grew solemn. "Although it's understandable you wouldn't recognize me. You were here at the beginning of my ninth life. You knew me as Wanderer."

Darren's jaw dropped in outright shock. He gaped wordlessly at Wanda for lengthy seconds. Eventually he forced himself to become a bit more composed. "Wanderer? It's truly you?"

"It is," said Wanda with confirming nod of her head. Before turning she flashed the still stunned Healer an embarrassed smile. "You will have many questions, I'm sure."

But her smile was fleeting and Wanda's stoic expression reasserted itself as she headed to the exit. "However, we have much to do and not much time. I'm sure the Seekers are already on their way."

###

"Marc, can I get you anything?" asked Dry Sands on the Plain. "Something to drink, maybe?"

The slim brunet Soul woman tried to give him a tentative friendly smile, but as she looked down at the manacles chaining his arms and legs to the chair her expression faded to one of forlorn loss. Marc was being held in one of the many offices in the Soul Administrative Building. Used often as
a waiting area, the room was usually filled with neat rows of chairs and tables. Turned to an improvised holding cell and interrogation room for Marc, most of the furniture had been removed. Leaving the room mostly bare except for the Human and the Seekers still guarding him.

Not really focusing on anything, Marc reply to her was feeble and bleak. "No, thanks."

Distressed by the desolation in Marc words. Dry Sands surveyed the room quickly and found one of the few available chairs. She dragged it over, closing the distance to Marc and then sat down. Folding her hands in her lap, she again tried. "Are you sure? You must be thirsty."

Marc did not respond and one of his guards, a large man dressed in the dark uniform of a Seeker eyed her warily. "Educator Dry Sands, you should not sit so close to the wild Human. He is dangerous."

Dry Sands pursed her lips together as she stared back steadily at the Seeker, a rather stern act of defiance from one Soul to another. "He is not," she replied, her words firmer than her usual light and soft responses.

The Seeker's brow tightened, distrust and uncertainty tugging on his features at Dry Sands' boldness. One of the other Seekers, a stout man with dark hair, upon seeing his companion's reaction shook his head sadly and addressed the other Seekers. "She has become corrupted. Confused and misguided. Even after rescuing her from the Humans she still sought this one out."

"Perhaps it would be for the best if we removed her from this room," added the third. He seemed to be judging the task as he eyed the young woman. "I understand she will be remanded to the Comforters for evaluation."

At hearing the Seekers' speak, Dry Sands visibly trembled. Fear sharply mounted in her eyes as she contemplated their plans for her. Marc, who had sullenly watched the exchange between the Souls, spoke up. "Didn't anyone ever teach you three manners? You're scaring her." His words finally growing above a murmur.

All three of the Seekers blanched, unexpectedly disconcerted by Marc both speaking more than a few syllables and the content of his words. The stout one gave Marc a long stare. "You are ultimately the cause of her fear," he said succinctly. A look of disdain twisted his usually placid face. "You and the others of your kind have manipulated and twisted this gentle Soul into fearing us."

A bitter laugh escaped Marc's throat. "Whatever you got to tell yourself," he said and did not wait for a response. He was done trying to convince these militant Souls he and his people weren't a threat to them. It was hopeless. Marc had thought he was making progress with Seeker Sage of Tides, convincing the Seeker of his peaceful wish of coexistence. But abruptly she, or he, or whatever the relevant pronoun you wanted to use, left Marc here under guard by the Seekers. It seemed time had run for the Humans in Chicago. Turning back to Dry Sands he resolutely ignored the Seeker's comment. Marc was not going to spend whatever time he had left talking to these Seekers.

"Don't be scared Dry Sands. You don't have to do anything you don't want to," offered Marc in hopes of calming one of the few Souls who had ever showed his people any kindness and understanding.

Dry Sands' face colored and she averted her eyes from Marc, casting them toward her feet. Her body posture going more rigid, apparently from his words. Marc had noticed the young woman occasionally became quite shy when she was around him. He was not quite sure why. As a member
of their little secret cabal. Dry Sands had rarely spoken to Marc directly. Usually, she only spoke during their meeting and then only about matters about their long-term peace plans.

Marc offered her a feeble smile. "Sorry, didn't mean to upset you. Thanks for coming to see me."

Further blushing broke out on Dry Sands face, but she did manage to raise her eyes from the ground and look at Marc. She composed herself after a few silent moments and then answered him. "After the Healers finished checking me out there wasn't much for me to do. I was told not to leave, but not much else." She glanced at the three Seekers keeping guard and added in a lowered whisper, "I don't think they know what exactly to do with me."

"Same here," replied Marc and felt what little humor he had escaped him. He swallowed hard, his throat really was dry. More to himself than Dry Sands he said, "Don't know why the Seekers are dragging this out. Just get it over and done with."

"They're afraid of you," stated Dry Sands. There was no accusation in her words, but she did look pointedly at three Seekers in the room. The Seekers, for their part ignored her comment.

Curiosity tugged at Marc. "Why aren't you frightened of me? Of us?"

Dry Sands cocked her head and looked thoughtful. "I was scared of you, at least at first," she explained. "Before you came to our Quorum, Seeker Skyward had told us you were there to trick us. Tell us lies. But when I listened to you I began to doubt you were lying. You seemed very earnest."

The smile crept back onto Marc's face. "Thanks for believing me."

But Dry Sands was not finished. Her eyes grew distant as she played through memories of the past few months. "Then when...He came..." her words came out quivering in relived fear and Dry Sands' body gave an involuntary shudder.

Marc guessed at her meaning. "You mean Adams."

Dry Sands confirmed with one hushed word. "Yes." After once again collecting herself, Dry Sands continued her reminiscing. "I thought I knew what it was to be frightened of Humans. I had heard of your capacity for violence and cruelty. But the Human named Adams...it was like he...enjoyed making others suffer. As if he gained strength from causing others pain."

"He was a monster," agreed Marc coolly.

Marc was surprised when Dry Sands shifted closer to him. Holding his gaze, she spoke purposefully. "And you fought him. You hit him and he hit you. I had never seen such violence."

Out of the corner of his eye Marc noticed the three Seekers had shifted their stance. Previously they had remained distant and wary of him. Almost as if being near Marc might expose them to something toxic. But now they were leaning in, their eyes beset with growing interest. Souls commonly found the idea of fighting highly distasteful, yet the Seekers seemed unusually fascinated by Dry Sands' account of Marc's battle with Adams.

With evident confusion at why Dry Sands or the Seekers were so amazed by the fight, Marc made a prolonged shake of his head. "I wouldn't think you guys would care about two humans in a beat down. We were basically trying to kill each other."

"I know," came a whispered response from Dry Sands. "He wanted to kill you, kill us. Human or Soul, it didn't matter to him. When he hurt you and were on the ground, we ran to you. I didn't even
think, I just moved, trying to protect you. But…” and Dry Sands trailed off. Both Marc and the Seekers waited expectantly for her go on. Dry Sands’ expression subtly shifted and now bordered on something like awe as she gazed at Marc. "But in the end, you protected us from him. You were strong and brave."

Now Marc found his face flushing at her unexpected praise. Bashfully he said, "I don't know about that…” he trailed off, uncertain what to say.

A soft smile blossomed on Dry Sands’ face as she watched Marc. "There are stories your kind tell that I've read….About knights and princesses, kings and monsters, of heroes and villains… fairy tales."

More than a little stunned, Marc asked Dry Sands, "You think I'm some knight in shining armor?"

Dry Sands' usual shyness rapidly reasserted itself. Her cheeks reddened and her eyes darted to the ground. Her response was nearly inaudible and Marc had to strain to hear her. "You are, at least to me."

A small but significant puzzle piece suddenly fit together for Marc. He felt rather foolish for not seeing it sooner. "That's why you're here, isn't?" he asked.

Any type of confirmation Dry Sands could have made was cut off when the door to the outside hallway opening and an ebony colored Soul strode into the room. The newcomer scanned the room and quickly centered his gaze on Marc. Keeping his distance, he appraised the Human with a clinical eye, calmly assessing some quality unfathomable to Marc. Reaching some sort of decision he turned to Marc’s three guards.

In hushed tones, he spoke rapidly to the Seekers. Marc couldn't make out more than a few snippets of their conversation. Words like 'critical care', 'high-stress levels, and 'may lose them both.' Whatever was being discussed seemed to greatly distress his guards. There was a good deal consternation between the four Souls. Much more than one would see in the naturally tranquil and peaceful Souls.

In a whisper of his own, Marc said to Dry Sands, "Can you find out what they are going on about?" She nodded once and stood up, making to approach the assembled Souls. But the three Seekers and the stranger broke apart first and approached the two of them.

"What's wrong?” asked Marc and Dry Sands at nearly the same time as the dark-skinned newcomer judiciously advanced towards Marc. He was slender with a very angular face and a thin head of hair. He stopped ten feet way from where Marc was chained and spoke softly. "Mr. Walters, I need your assistance."

"For what?” asked Marc blankly.

With a tilt of his head, the man began to explain. "I am Healer Dry Stones. One of your people is with child. She's gone into la…”

"Sarah!” exclaimed Marc, his explosive response dramatically cutting off the Healer. Marc attempted to leap out of his chair, but the chains anchored him in place. He yanked ineffectually against restraints while a long stream of obscenities came out of his mouth. His struggling had Dry Stonesretreating in a panic and the three Seekers rushing over to Marc. They grabbed on to Marc and worked to forcefully push him into the chair.

"Be still!” commanded one of the Seekers as they struggled with agitated Human. "You will only
harm yourself."

Still seething, Marc finally stopped his efforts and relaxed against his restraints. "Alright, Alright, I'll be calm!" he yelled at his captors. They promptly pushed into the seat and firmly held him in place.

As much as it was possible with three Seekers holding him down and being chained to a chair Marc twisted to face Dry Stones. At seeing Marc's reaction to his greeting, the Healer had doubled his distance to Marc and stood tight with tension. With a herculean effort, Marc quieted his voice and spoke almost amiably to the man. "Sarah has about two weeks to go. You're saying she's now in labor?"

"Yes," confirmed Dry Stones mildly disturbed by what he had just witnessed. "The stress of her capture has likely caused her to start her deliver early."

Marc twisted back to the Seekers. "Where's her husband Mike?" he demanded.

"He's being prepared for insertion," explained Dry Stones openly as he warily re-approached Marc. "But the issue is not with her partner. This woman Sarah has become extremely agitated and emotional about her unborn child."

"Of course she is, you moron," growled out Marc.

Dry Stones ignored Marc's insult. He continued speaking, his own voice starting to fill with concern and unease. "I had given her a large dosage of SLEEP to render her unconscious so a normal C-section could be carried out." He made a faint helpless gesture with hands. "But she is fighting against the medicine's effects. She forces herself to remain conscious. Putting immense strain on both herself and her child." Incredulity pulled on his narrow face. "I've never seen someone so strong…"

"You're going to take her baby away from her. What the hell did you expect would happen?" snapped Marc.

Healer Dry Stones regarded Marc grimly "I do not mean to cause Sarah pain. I merely wish to deliver her baby safely."

Marc exhaled roughly, an indignant sigh of anger. "Then what do you want from me?" he questioned the Healer.

Dry Stones nodded succinctly. "I have tried to calm her and I fear give her a larger dose of SLEEP will only cause damage to her body. I need someone she will trust to help her relax and allow her child to be safely removed."

"So you can steal and then insert one of your kind into her baby? No deal," retorted Marc with a sneer.

The Healer's face went through something akin to a convulsion. Disgust was prevalent in his voice in his voice as he replied. "You prefer she lose the baby and possibly her own life than help me? You soulless Humans are truly horrific and beyond redeeming."

"You bastard," snorted Marc. "You have the gall to stand there and talk to me about being a monster when we all know what awaits us. You going to insert Seekers into all of us, suck out whatever you can learn, and then dispose of us. I will not help you."

There was a marked pause, for everyone in the room knew Marc spoke the truth. The Healer shook
his head sadly and turned to leave, muttering about illogical primitives. But he was stopped when Dry Sands on the Plain spoke, louder and more firmly than Marc had ever heard her before. "Healer, please wait!"

Dry Stones regarded Dry Sands intently and folded his arms, waiting for the young woman to continue. She moved slowly over to Marc and the Seekers keeping held down. Speaking directly to Marc's captors but addressing everyone in the room she said ardently, "Please let me talk with Marc. I will convince him to help." Pausing for a moment, Dry Sands' unexpected confidence faltered and she added meekly, "Alone please?"

The three guards exchanged looks and did not appear to be very open to the idea. Dry Sands was not deterred. "Please," she said again. "No one need suffer and I can calm Marc down. What I need to say to him... is... umm... private," she managed to say with a nervous squeak at the end.

"If you can truly get the savage to cooperate," relented the portlier Seeker, as he maintained a suspicious eye on Marc. "Then please do so. I have no desire to prolong anyone's suffering." He let go of Marc and retreated a short distance from Marc. The other two Seekers reluctantly joined him giving Dry Sands and Marc a small amount of solitude.

Marc had listened to and watched Dry Sand's exchange with the other Souls with a perplexed frown on his face. As Dry Sand knelt down near him, he shook his head and said dismissively, "Dry Sands, there is nothing you can say to change my mind."

Hesitantly she leaned in close to Marc. No one could make out her words she uttered to Marc but the effect on the Human was profound. He openly gawked at Dry Sands, clear astonishment etched on his face. She straightened back up and meet Marc's dumbfounded gaze. Clearing his throat he said hoarsely, "You mean it?"

The briefest of smiles crossed Dry Sands lips and she said, "Marc, there is a saying your people have – 'Where there is life, there is hope.' I think it's a beautiful adage. Please, believe me. Please help Healer Dry Stones."

Marc took a long look at Dry Sands on the Plain and then to the others. At the same time, the three Seekers and Healer Dry Stones traded blank expressions as they waited to see what Marc would do. Finally, with a deep sigh, Marc straightened in his chair and as much as it was possible while being shackled, took on an air of calm dignity. To Dry Stones he said, "Take me to Sarah, I will help you."
"Kate...Paul...little Mia...it is so wonderful to...see you." Dashing Songs' words were bittersweet, choked thick with emotion as he gazed in wonder at the Humans who had secretly lived in the hotel for the last few months. The Humans were equally astonished by Dashing Songs amazing recovery. His eyes fully restored, he truly saw them for the first time.

His eyes, like everything else in his host body, had been mended and restored by the expert hands of the Healers. His host's body had suffered from multiple lacerations from the destruction of the glass door entrance of the Hotel Rose. The wounds were grievous enough the invading Seekers had transferred him immediately to the nearby hospital.

Dashing Songs had not come alone, two Seekers had accompanied him to the hospital. They planned to have an extended discussion with the formerly blind caretaker once his body was fully healed about his hidden guests. Or they would have, as now both black uniformed Souls slept peacefully outside Dashing Songs room.

Watching this small impromptu reunion between the Humans and the little white-haired Soul hotel keeper, Healer Long Rivers turned to Wanda and suppressed a minor groan of misery. "I have assaulted two Souls."

Wanda glanced back to where the Seekers were sleeping and then back to Long Rivers and the small canister of SLEEP he held in his hand. She touched him lightly on his arm to comfort him, she knew just how hard this act was for him. "I know, I have been exactly where you are now Long Rivers. It is a difficult step to take. But do not despair, the Seekers will recover with no ill effects."

With his eyes still locked on the two sleeping Seekers, Long Rivers nodded. Fatigue pulled on every inch of his body. He finally let out a long sigh and with effort straightened his body. Running a hand through his beard he turned his attention back to Dashing Songs.

"We are lucky Dashing Songs was here. But what of the others? Dry Sands, Bright Moon, or Nigel?" questioned the Healer.

"Hopefully," broached Wanda, "they are merely being detained by the Seekers." She had a brief surge of optimism. "Perhaps they have even been successful in convincing the Seekers to change their stance on the Humans."

She tried to run with this confidence, but it was not something she could maintain. Wanda had no idea if anyone who remained in the hotel was still alive. Thoughts of her Ian rudely pushed themselves into the forefront of her mind. She clamped down hard on those thoughts for they would drag her down, strangle her till she was nothing but raw shattered emotions. Later, she would deal with her jagged fears...later.

In the hall, stepping quickly past the sleeping Seekers, apparently still worried they would suddenly awake, Annie approached the doorway. She was looking much better than she had in the tunnels below the city. Food, water, and some clean clothes returned some of the color to her pale skin. But Wanda noted she still had dark circles under eyes.

"Alexis, Nancy, and Greg are away, back down the tunnels," said Annie as she came from the doorway.
"That is good," nodded Long Rivers a bit stiffly. He remained standing uneasily before Crystal Spires formed host body.

"At the very least if this goes badly we'll distract the Seekers long enough to let them get away," said Annie. She had tried to laugh flippantly as she spoke, and it failed badly.

Cross her arms and holding them tightly to her body like she was too cold, Annie's erroneous smile faded and she said in a weak whisper, "I won't...I can't be a...host again."

Something seemed to strengthen in Long Rivers. A firmness that was not there before. Resolutely he said, "I won't let them."

Annie wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and when she spoke her words were muffled and tight in her throat. "Thank you, Riv for doing this. And thank you, Wanda."

Wanda felt herself begin to nod in agreement, but Annie went on unexpectedly. "I mean...if it was the other way around...If this whole world flipped on its head and it was just a handful of Souls and millions of Humans." She paused, her eyes pained, mixed with fears and regrets. "I know how scared I'd be to stand up to my kind...This must be terrifying for you."

Taking Annie's hand in hers, Wanda squeezed it lightly. "It will be alright Annie. I know it." It had to be a lie; for she had no way of knowing. And yet Wanda had told the supposed untruth flawlessly, and she did not feel like she was lying. Perhaps believing in something strong enough made its own truth mused Wanda.

Turning from Annie and Long Rivers, Wanda approached Mia. The girl was standing a little ways from the others near Dashing Songs' bed. She seemed oddly relaxed, with a pleasant smile on her face, as she stared out the window of the hospital room. Kate and Paul had tried to send her away with the others, a last-ditch effort to protect their youngest, but Mia had adamantly refused. Saying only their confrontation with the Seekers sounded like fun. Wanda shuddered at the memory of just what Mia considered 'fun.'

"Mia," began Wanda. She still felt nervous around this strange child. "There will be many of us when we confront the Seekers. I know it will be difficult for you." Hesitantly she added, "I need you to be very still and quiet."

Mia remained still, seemingly not registering Wanda's presence. She continued to look out the window. "Mia," whispered Wanda, "please?"

With a bob of her head, Mia finally moved from the window and faced Wanda. Outside Wanda could see more than a dozen giant black SUVs pull up in front of the Hospital. Mia smile was unchanged when she said in a sing-song childlike voice, "They're here."

####

"Sarah, do you remember when you first met Mike? He and I had just rescued you from those pain in the ass Seekers," said Marc Walters with a note of wistfully whimsy in his voice. "And he was so tongue tied around you. I could tell he was completely smitten."

Seeker Owen watched as the Human hunched close to the pregnant woman. He spoke in a warm, calming tenor, his lips only a few inches from her ear. The Human named Sarah was very pale, and her skin drenched in perspiration. Although escape was hardly practical in her state, her arms and legs were tied down. In attempt to stop her from injuring herself.
With an entire floor of Chicago's Administrative Building devoted to securing the rebel Humans there was plenty of room in the impromptu medical center, the Healers had established to treat the prisoners. The spotlessly clean suite had room to treat half a dozen people at once and Owen, and his team had given Marc a measured amount of space to speak to Sarah. A slight loosening of their rigid control over the man's movements, but not nearly enough to let Marc do anything dangerous. Nearby the Healers huddled, conferring over their patient. They worried the Human female had some form of internal bleeding from the strain of her pregnancy. Usually they would operate quickly to remove the newborn and proceed to repair the bleeding. What should have been a simple process of anesthetizing via a dosage of SLEEP to start the operation was rendered futile when the woman refused to succumb.

"Yourrr…Oonnneee…of…themmm," moaned Sarah in thick slurred words as she forced herself to remain in her half-conscious state.

Owen could not help but be amazed by the Human's strength. She had received two dosages of the SLEEP compound and still she had weakly thrashed against the Healers. From the shock of her capture combined with the pain of her contractions had conspired to keep her awake and resisting the effects of SLEEP. But it was more than adrenaline keeping her going. It seemed through sheer willpower she was resisting the effects of the drugs. Owen had never seen someone fight so hard. All in some wild hope of protecting her unborn child. No matter the savagery and barbarism of these Humans, Owen felt a pang of guilt for what was to occur. Soul mothers sacrificed themselves for their offspring, it seemed Human mothers were the same.

Would it be so wrong if they allowed this mother to live and child to remain with her?

"Shhh…No…No," shushed Marc in an attempt to calm her. "See, look," he leaned in close to show her his eyes. "I'm still Marc Walters. Not some dumbass bugger."

Sarah's eyes were frantic but at the same time unfocused. The effects of her body warring against the drugs. She managed to concentrate on Marc's still normal eyes and a spark of recognition played on her sweat-soaked brow. "G-g-going to…take my…baby," sobbed Sarah.

Leaning back in his seat, Marc reached out and took Sarah's hand in his own. With her addled senses, she could not tell he still wore the bonds clasping his hands together. "Easy, Sarah," comforted Marc with a gentle squeeze of his hand. "No one's going to take your baby."

Marc lied as only a Human could, his deceptions spoken flawlessly. Lies spun better than any Soul could, even the Seekers, reflected Owen. But the Seeker did notice Marc's easy going smile did not reach his eyes. His Human brown eyes were hard and distant. Owen wondered how much this deception cost Marc. It was not something he had ever thought about, the toll one paid to deceive a friend.

Was this how Carl Jenner felt when he assumed the role of Seeker Gray Dawns and befriended him?

Sarah groaned, this time from a contraction. Marc held her hand as she rode through the pain. Even though she was in the middle of labor, it was clear Sarah was beginning to wane. Marc's efforts to calm her were starting to work.

"Wwwherrress Mmmike?"

Marc lowered his voice and spoke in soft whispers to Sarah's sleepy inquiry of her partner. "He's just running late. He'll be here any minute. You know he wouldn't miss this."
"Hhhhope…hhhhe…hurriesss," came her sluggish incoherent reply. She let out a jaw cracking yawn and then her eyes gradually fluttered closed.

Marc continued to hold Sarah's hand. Her breathing deepened and started to come in regular long intervals. From where the Healers had quietly huddled together as they had observed the Human's efforts, they now began to move. Healer Dry Stones ordered his assistants to start to prepare Sarah for her operation. In a rapid, efficient order, they began to work on the unconscious human and ready their surgical tools.

As Dry Stones checked over Sarah's vitals, Marc finally let go of her hand and straightened up. The effort seemed to cause the man a great deal of pain and to Owen's eyes it looked like Marc had aged ten years in the last ten minutes.

Dry Stones, still surprised by Marc's earlier change of heart, made a gesture of appreciation to the Human. With a mild smile he said, "Thank you for helping."

"Go to hell."

Without a further word to Dry Stones, Marc stalked back to the waiting Seekers. Tension filled the Human's body and made his movements stiff and jilted. He made a sad, mournful sigh and haltingly turned from the sleeping woman to face Owen. An internal struggle seemed to be waring in the Human and Owen and his fellow Seekers braced in the anticipation of a fight with Marc.

But instead of angry, hateful words, the Human spoke softly. "May I please watch the birth?" There was a desperate plea in Marc's request. Perhaps, reflected Owen, the man had managed to control his baser instincts and act civilized. Guardedly he deliberated with the other three Seeker making up Marc's guard detail. The Human was now being cooperative and on the face of the request Owen could not see a reason to deny him.

"If you remain quiet and do not disrupt the surgery," replied Owen after a few more moments of consideration. "But," he warned cautiously, "act out in any way and we will render you unconscious with SLEEP."

Marc beamed a wide smile at Owen. "Scouts honor, chief. I'll be a good little monster."

Owen puzzled at the non-sequitur but ultimately gave up trying to understand the bizarre statement. Marc twisted back to where the Healers were working away on Sarah. He made a brief sidelong glance at Educator Dry Sands on the Plain. The young woman sat unobtrusively in the far corner of the room. She had said nothing to either the Seekers or Marc since she had entered the room. Her hands were on her lap, but they were in a constant state of motion. Opening and closing them in a nervous fashion. Owen made a mental note to himself that when they finished here to speak to Dry Sands alone. The regrettably misguided Soul needed to understand how dangerous these Humans were. He did not like how she doggedly followed Marc around.

"So what's your name, chief?" asked Marc casually. He had not turned from watching the Healers, but he had made a small inclination of his head towards Owen.

Still wary of Marc's seemingly benign attitude Owen answered after few moments. "I am called Owen."

Marc raised an eyebrow. "Your host's name then?"

"Yes," replied Owen with a short sigh, "it was easier than my original name. I…liked it."

"Oh, so this isn't your first world. Where you from Owen?"
Owen was finding Marc's change in behavior more than a little suspicious. Before Marc had either ignored or been antagonistic towards the Seekers guarding him. Now the Human was acting like they were friends. He reminded himself Marc Walters was known to be extremely devious. Able to manipulate innocent Souls. There were rumors among the Seekers that Marc and several of the other Humans in the city had taken advantage of some Souls to learn more about their kind. So they could improve their ability to blend in the population. Owen saw Marc's questions as just an attempt to influence him and refrained from answering.

But Marc had no time to continue pressing Owen for information. The Healers' activities were proceeding smoothly and efficiently. Both Human and Souls attention were drawn to the operation that was rapidly reaching its completion. Healers moved with measured control as they performed the C-section. Bottles of CLEAN were used liberally along with many surgical towels as the surgery unfolded.

With great care, Healer Dry Stones slowly pulled a form from Sarah's swollen midsection. There was a long moment of silence, and everyone seemed to be holding their breath. And then there was a new sound. A cry. A wail. A brand new life entered the world.

Marc leaned in as close as he could to see the infant. Owen found himself doing the same without realizing.

"It's a boy!" shouted Marc in joy.

###

Three Souls – Wanda, Long Rivers, and Dashing Songs and Four Humans – Kate, Paul, Annie, and Mia, walked resolutely down the main hallway of the Hospital towards the entrance. News of Humans arrival at the Hospital had quickly spread and they had collected quite a few onlookers. With the appearance of the Seekers, the interest of everyone in the hospital had spread like wildfire. Many gazed upon Wanda and the others with open astonishment, stunted their own kind would be with the fugitive Humans.

Wanda kept a relaxed smile on her face as they walked. Trying to enforce a certain level of calm and certainty. Risking a quick glance back at her little band of Humans she saw the fear on their faces. They were trying hard to not show it, but their dread was plainly visible. Quite possibly they were walking to their doom. Like lambs to the slaughter. It had not been easy to convince them of this course of action. They were going before the Seekers without any protection but their three Soul friends. Perhaps a brave last stand to give Greg, Nancy, and little Alexis a chance to escape or, just maybe, a chance to change the fate of all remaining Humans.

At the wide glass entrance to the hospital, a crowd had already begun to form. A complete mix of faces, young and old, men and woman, all of them with a sheen of silver in their eyes. Some eyes were filled with curiosity at the spectacle, others watchful and concerned, and regrettably some cast fearful and frightened looks upon the Humans. Most of the assembled Souls were Healers or other staff of the hospital. They all knew Long Rivers and many of them would recognize Annie, the former host of Healer Crystal Spires. Near the reception desk, she saw Healer Darren, the gray-haired man with his eyes wide as he saw Kate.

The doors to the foyer of the hospital burst opened and dozens of black dressed Seekers poured in from the outside. Not dressed in their regular dark uniforms. Instead, they wore the bulkier mass of body armor. In Wanda's eyes it was disturbingly similar to the outfits worn by the Facility gunmen. The Seeker quickly formed up in entrance into neat, organized columns, all of them brandishing
guns and a nervous shudder went through Wanda and the others.

Among the inflow of Seekers came half a dozen other Souls. Their clothes plain and simple compared to the armored Seekers. A little jolt went through Long Rivers as he took in these new arrivals. Licking his lips, he whispered to Wanda. "The Quorum, it seems they have not come here to support us."

"We don't know that for sure," whispered back Wanda.

The distance of the lobby now stood between the Seekers and Wanda's little group and on all sides a crowd surrounded both parties. There a short moment of awkward silence when a thin man with a wild mane of white hair pulled himself from the Quorum members and cautiously approached.

"Healer Long Rivers, last night myself and other members of the Chicago Quorum were unexpectedly detained by the Seekers," said the bushy-haired man. With a slight dismayed shake of his head as he looked at the Humans he added, "Apparently you and Educator Dry Sands have been keeping secrets from us."

With a shaky sigh, Long Rivers answered, "Yes, Comforter Benjamin, we have. I do apologize." With an ever so slight smile, he indicated Annie and the others. "Given the delicate nature of the subject, I thought discretion would be advised."

"There was a great concern you were no longer Healer Long Rivers, but his host recovered," said Benjamin, still giving the Healer a weary appraisal.

"I am not," responded Long Rivers, "nor are any of the Souls here." He indicated the others with a gentle wave of his hand.

Benjamin frowned faintly. "Then, what are you doing with these Humans?"

Long Rivers spoke up, more to the audience of other Souls than to the Comforter. "I and Dry Sands on the Plain have been meeting with these Humans in effort to reach an agreement where both species may co-exist peacefully."

"Truly?" came a new voice from behind Benjamin, from within the ranks of Seekers. Glancing around Wanda found the owner of the voice was a young woman, nearly almost a girl. She was small, just like Wanda. And like Wanda's body she had fine golden hair. But it was cut short, forming a blonde halo around her little face. And although she stood with the Seekers, she was not dressed like them. It certainly would be ludicrous for her small form to wear the bulky body armor like the other Seekers. But nor did she wear the typical black uniform most Seekers wore. Instead she wore a pale blue blouse and skirt, making her look very out of place.

Stepping forward with small delicate steps she approached the three rebel Souls. With a light smile she said, "Healer Long Rivers, I have heard this story from Educator Dry Sands. She tried to assure me you and her were working for the greater good in establishing a peace agreement with the Humans." Her nose wrinkled as though she smelled something unpleasant. "A rather distasteful idea, I should think."

"It is true and if you listen, I believe you'll see we can live together," defended Wanda.

Still smiling sweetly the little woman turned to Wanda. "You are Wanderer are you not?"

"Yes," replied Wanda, trying to keep her voice steady as she realized it would no longer be possible to hide her identity. "Although most simply call me Wanda. And you are?"
"I am so glad to meet you," said the woman with an ever growing smile. "It is so rare to meet someone else from Origin. And you'll forgive my manners, I should have introduced myself. I am Seeker Jade in the Hollows. But Jade is just fine."

Wanda blinked in surprise. This Soul was from Origin like herself? "Ah, I see," said Wanda as she worked to recover from this unexpected encounter.

"Now," said Jade as she addressed both the Seekers and the gathered crowd. "I believe it is time you stopped your running and handed over the four Humans behind you." The Seekers all nodded in unison while the other assembled onlookers watched wide-eyed, waiting to see what would happen next.

Wanda steeled herself, this was the moment. This was the beginning. Their ultimate act of defiance. She met Seeker Jade's composed gaze and said just one word in reply.

"No."

###

An assistant to Dry Stones, a young woman with fair skin and short copper-colored curls, took the howling baby from the Healer. She proceeded to a wash basin and began to clean away the afterbirth. Dry Stones and the other Healer went back to continue to work on Sarah. Marc followed after the woman, a broad happy smile on his face.

"Is he okay?" question Marc as he watched the young Healer work on the squirming infant. "Giving all that SLEEP to Sarah didn't hurt him?"

The Human stood a full head taller than the Healer and she shrank back at Marc's approach. Owen moved over and took Marc by the arm. "Leave the Healers alone. Let them work."

Marc resisted Owen's pull. "Hey, I'm just checking on the little guy. He's not having the best start to his life."

"The Healers know what they are doing," replied Owen. He glanced at the female Healer, who looked very relieved that Owen was intervening with the wild Human. Owen decided it was time to put this temporary excursion to an end. "Come," he said softly, "it is time you returned to the holding room."

"Owen," said Marc, "don't do this. Just let Sarah keep her child. The baby can't possibly be a threat to you." And Owen was surprised how gentle Marc had spoken. His voice as calm and pleasant as any Soul. But he was fixing Owen with a very intense stare, penetrating as well as pleading.

"It's for the greater good," intoned Owen solemnly. "The child will be gifted with one of us."

"Gifted? Is that what you are calling it?" continued Marc in his mild and unassuming voice. It was a little unnerving how peaceful the Human spoke. Yet Marc's brown eyes bore into Owen. "You mean you're going to cut him open and turn a poor defenseless infant into a host."

Owen was finding it hard to keep Marc's gaze. "I realize you don't see what we're doing as a good thing. But it's a necessity for well-being of our society. We…must carry out our duty." And Owen was surprised by the note of apology that made its way into his words. He found his eyes sliding to the floor, wishing he did not have to take part in this deed.
Was this really for the greater good?

Marc suddenly pulled against Owen's grip. The Seeker was momentarily caught off guard and quickly sought to tighten his grip. But Marc was faster and his body was lean and powerful. Before the other Seekers could act, Marc barreled into Owen and sent the Seeker sprawling on the hard tiled floor.

Within a heartbeat, the entire surgery suite erupted into pandemonium. Something loud and metal crashed to the ground. Owen was struggling to get up when Seeker Casey stumbled back, his nose gushing a stream of scarlet blood, and slammed into him. Both Seekers went down in a heap on the floor. There was a yelp from one the Healers and then the sound of two people struggling.

"Hold him!" shouted Dry Stones, his voice panicked and greatly strained. Then there was a hard smack of skin hitting skin.

Owen pushed his host body to its limits as he struggled to rise to his knees. He found his breaths were coming in short hard gasps. Beside him Seeker Casey was still groaning on the floor. Owen managed to right himself just in time to see Dry Stones push a bottle in close to Marc's face. The Human tried to twist out the way, but the other two Seekers were holding him fast. A long puffy of silver gas came from the end of the small cylinder and enveloped the Human's face. Marc bucked and continued to struggle, but all too quickly the SLEEP began to work. He twisted back and forth a few times and then went slack in the Seekers arms.

"Is everyone alright?" asked Dry Stones after the Seekers holding Marc had lowered the unconscious Human to the floor. The Healer was still breathing hard as struggled to recover from the unexpected violence.

"That modster brobe my dose," came Casey's unusually high nasally voice from nearby. Owen turned to see the Seeker was holding his hand over his face, blood continuing to trickle down. He began to help his colleague up when a startled cry from one of the Healer froze everyone in place.

"Where is the infant!?"

Startled, Owen whipped around to see the short haired redhead frantically looking around the table where she had been cleaning up the newborn. There was a sudden rush as every Soul began to look around. At first in a panic as they thought the baby might have been hurt by Marc's unexpected attack, and then in bewilderment as it seemed the child had just vanished into thin air.

Looking around Owen realized with another jolt someone else was missing. Dry Sands on the Plain was no longer sitting quietly in the chair. She was not anywhere in the room. Owen blinked slowly as it suddenly dawned on him what had happened. They had been so concerned with Marc, they had missed the actual instigator. But of course, it was natural for them to overlook. Betrayal was not something Souls did. It just was...impossible.

Owen rushed to the door and flung it opened, but Dry Sands and the baby were already gone.

###

Seeker Jade's face registered a strange mix of emotions as she took in Wanda's little group. Her friendly smile quickly became marred by the obvious apprehension in the rest of her body. The resulting features on her face were more than slightly disturbing, her wide smile remained plastered in place even as her jaw tightened and her blue-grey eyes narrowed. It was quickly
becoming apparent to everyone that Wanda, Long Rivers, and Dashing Songs were not going to move and the petite Seeker was momentarily uncertain how to respond.

Wanda felt an intensifying rush in her ears, her heart was hammering in her small chest. All eyes in the hospital's lobby were on her, she was at the center of the storm. There was soft but continuous rustle of whispering coming from surrounding Souls. A quick glance around showed a range of emotions in their silver-sheened eyes. Mostly curiosity and concern, but hints also of confusion and fear. And all of it was for her. She had to convince them.

'Just breath,' Wanda told herself. She had wild and strange thought about taking in too much air and then hyperventilating in front of the crowd. She would pass out and all her grand plans brought low by her body's betrayal. It made her almost giggle from her dizzying turmoil.

"Wanda, is it?" asked Jade as her eyes focused on Wanda. Her words were slow and sublime, "Are you sure you are well? Don't you think it would be best if our Healers carefully inspected you?"

Willing with all her ten lifetimes of experience, Wanda forced her tremulous body to behave. For the most part she was successful. Her body's quivering slowed and her response to Jade's question was almost clear and coherent. "That's n-n-not necessary. Healer Long Rivers," and she indicated the bearded man beside her, "has examined me. I'm in quite good health."

Remarkably, a rising sensation of calm began to overtake her. Her light-headedness retreated as she spoke, there was no going back. She took a step forward towards Jade and the small army of Seekers. A tiny, careful movement, hopefully, to convey she was trying to bridge the divide. Souls strove for harmony in all things.

"I'm...a bit concerned about Healer Long Rivers as well," replied Jade carefully. "In my opinion the three of you have had some very...unhealthy associations."

"You mean Humans," replied Wanda directly, not letting Jade equivocate. She risked a quick glance over her shoulder at the four Humans, who were standing as still as stone, pale in the morning light coming through glass doors. "I'm mean that is why we are all here, is it not?"

Jade's smile flickered. "Well, yes," she answered stringently. "I was only trying to be conscientious to all those gathered." Jade sniffed a slight dismissive sound. "But if you're going to be blunt, then so be it. You three have been associating with wild Humans."

Wanda had not even formulated a response when Dashing Songs unexpected spoke up with a question, "What, exactly, Seeker, is wrong with associating with Humans?" She, Long Rivers, and Dashing Songs had not actually discussed how they were going to handle speaking. Wanda was prepared to do all the talking, but she was glad Dashing Songs jumped in, for his question left Jade sputtering to answer.

"Well...well...isn't it obvious?" responded Jade with an open-handed gestured.

"Please Seeker, enlightened me," requested Dashing Songs.

Jade stood very still and took several deep, even breaths. Turning from the three protestors she addressed the entire crowd. "Have you forgotten," began Jade in her light, sweet voice, "what has happened in this city? It has been attacked, twice I might add, by a very dangerous group of Humans." As she spoke her tone grew severe and sharp, all her agreeable nature fading away. "Human's that released a disease that killed thousands of us. And then not even a month later they attacked the Administrative Center. They killed many more." Finishing, she looked directly at Kate and the others.
"I know," came Wanda's hushed reply. "I was there." Despite all her efforts, her body shuddered at the memories. "I saw the bodies."

Jade's response was perplexed but also carried a renewed echo of outrage. "Then how? How...can you defend them?"

It was the opening Wanda was hoping for. Turning gradually to face Paul, Kate, Mia, and Annie she smiled warmly at her Human friends. "Because, these Humans saved me. Seeker Jade, please don't think I'm embellishing when I say I know myself and many others would be dead if it were not for these Humans."

"And I can attest to this fact as well," added Long Rivers. He eyed the other members of the Quorum who stood off among the crowd. "All the members of the Quorum were saved by the actions of one Human." There was a shifting in Long Rivers' associates, an uncomfortable movement of bodies as they glanced fretfully between Long Rivers and the assembled Seekers.

It was the Artist Vermillion who finally spoke up, her voice jumpy and anxious as she addressed the Seekers. "Yes...this is correct. Marc Walters fought the Human named Adams. He...saved us."

Jade shook her head hard enough to make her short, breezy blonde hair to lightly flutter around her head. "You have all been deceived. Manipulated and tricked by this Marc Walters."

"That was what I was told when the Seekers came to rescue us," informed Long Rivers to the surrounding Souls. "I told them what happened, but the Seekers said I must be confused and traumatized. That clearly I had to be mistaken. No one wanted to listen to the truth." With a pause, the Healer grew somber. "It was traumatic, genuinely terrifying. But my mind was intact, I knew exactly what had happened."

For the first time, doubt flitted across Seeker Jade's face. The delicate features of her face contorted ever so slightly as her jaw locked tight. After a few moments, she spoke again, her voice gaining a conciliatory note. "If we made mistakes with handling your rescue, then I will apologize and take full responsibility. We never meant to discount or discredit anyone. You have to understand we were dealing with an incredibly difficult and stressful time. We were simply doing our best, as we have always done, to protect you."

"I don't doubt that you do, Seeker Jade," said Wanda earnestly. "And I believe you when you say we face a most dangerous group of insurgents. I merely wish to point out the Humans living in the Hotel Rose are not part of that threat."

"So you keep saying," replied Jade briskly as she eyed Wanda with growing impatience. "But how were we supposed to know?"

"Perhaps, Seeker Jade, you could do what I do," said Dashing Songs with a mild shrug of his shoulders. "When I want to know something about the Humans, I just ask them," explained Dashing Songs without a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Real disdain bubbled up in the diminutive Seeker, in both her words and her expression as her gaze focused on Dashing Songs. "You think because you've found a group of 'friendly' humans that you are now some sort of expert in dealing with them? Trust me, I've had many encounters." With a small, graceful twist of her hand she indicated the four Humans. "They may act civil. They may even be friendly for a while, but sooner or later they will turn hostile."

If Dashing Songs was intimidated, the round face little man did not show it. "Nearly thirty humans have made their home in my hotel for the better part of three months," defended the manager of the
Hotel Rose. "Now, they can be a little rowdy by our standards, sometimes a bit rude. But they have never been hostile." More than a little sadly he added, "The only ones who were violent in the hotel...were the Seekers."

The surrounding gathering of Souls quiet murmurings were steadily growing in volume as they listened to Dashing Songs speak. Wanda sensed an opportunity and addressed her people directly. "I understand your fears. I, too, once greatly feared the Humans. I knew them only as barbarians and monsters. But I grew to know them and I found them to be so much more." She paused as she once again pointed to the four Humans. "They have lived here, hidden in the city, since we came to this world. Their only action against us was to steal food and supplies to survive." Querying the crowd directly Wanda asked, "If they don't wish to harm us, why are they a threat?"

Before anyone could answer, Jade broke in animatedly. "They know how to remove us! They threatened to release the knowledge to other Humans if we did not meet their demands." A nervous chatter ran through the Souls as the turned, aghast, to look upon the Humans.

Wanda did her best not let her rising dismay show, she knew this fact was going to come out sooner or later. She had hoped so much it would be the latter. How to remove a Soul was such a closely guarded secret among her people. A secret any Soul should choose death before revealing to another race. Especially a race desperate to keep themselves from becoming unwilling hosts. The Seekers and the Quorum of Chicago had kept the fact Marc and the other Humans had learned their secret from the other Souls, fearing it would only lead to panic among the general population. Now Seeker Jade had released the information like a bombshell. And just like an explosion, fear burst through the gathered Souls. They pulled away from the four Humans and their three Soul protectors. Distancing themselves from what they perceived as a dire threat.

"Please," began Wanda, trying to regain the crowd's attention. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jade make a small motion with hand. A command for the Seekers to move in. Desperate, Wanda tried to force her voice loud enough to carry over the ever rising fearful drone of the surrounding Souls.

"Our demands!" came a new voice, louder, and more forceful than any Soul. It cut through the throng of noise from the crowd like a sharpened blade through soft butter. It was Kate, the small woman's anger giving her voice volume over Wanda's and even Jade's. "You want to know what are demands were!?” she shouted to the Souls, who for the moment halted their retreat and fretfully stared at the Human. "Leave us alone! Stop trying to kill us!"

Kate scrutinized the Souls intently with an angry scowl on her face. "So now you're worried about us yanking you out. Well, try living with the fear that any moment a bunch Seeker will come for you and wipe you out. Take you away and erase you. Live with that fear day after day. Year after year. All we wanted was a little space of peace and safety." She thrust a shaking finger towards the column of Seekers. "They've given us every reason to want to pull you out. But now what we going to do? Grab you and pull you out? All we would do is get ourselves killed."

Her voice lowered, became unstable, filling with tears. Kate's whole body sagged as her initial anger and adrenaline began to wear off. "What else could we do to defend ourselves? You've taken everything…"

The Seekers, unmoved by Kate's outburst continued their advance. Wanda's gambit to rally her people to defend the Humans seemingly a failure. But Kate was still not finished. Undeterred she again spoke, her words caught in a painful constriction of her throat from the tears running down her face. "You Souls say...you're all about peace...for once your lives why...don't you actually be peaceful..."
Jade and the Seekers bore down upon Wanda and the others. Jade's small oval face, so much like Wanda's was sadly sympathetic. There was no hate, or vindication in her eyes or face, just the calm certainty she and her fellow Seekers were doing the right thing. Wanda found herself wishing Jade would act cruel or hateful towards her. It would make it so much easier if she could hate Jade, but she only saw the concern of a fellow Soul. There was no more places to run, no more places to retreat. The end approached, and Wanda finally let herself think of Ian. Those memories she had held at bay less they destroy her, 'I'm so sorry Ian...' 

Coming to a stop right before Wanda, Seeker Jade looked her up and down. An evaluation, slow and precise. Softly she said, "Please, move."

"No," announced a gentle voice from right next to Wanda. Both Wanda and Jade started, for the voice was not from either Long Rivers or Dashing Songs. With their attention completely on each other, both Souls had missed seeing Healer Darren leave the gathering of Souls encircling both parties. The grey-haired man stood alongside the three other insurgent Souls.

Shifting her gaze from Wanda, Jade looked up to the Healer with a confused frown. Darren was very pale, and his body's frame a little shaky, but he remained standing with his arms outstretched before the troop of Seekers. He was blocking their way.

Darren glanced behind him to where Kate stood with her eyes wide in surprise. Turning back he quietly said, "Seeker Jade, Kate Gonzales is my friend. Please don't hurt her."

Jade made a tired sigh and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Healer...please, I don't mean to upset you, but I must..."

She was cut off as another person from the crowd joined Wanda's small band of resistors. It was Vermillion, her rosy cheeks lacked their normal color, but she too stood resolutely with the other Souls against the Seekers. Turning her head back to the crowd, she gave her fellow Quorum members a sad, joyless smile and said, "Has there not been enough violence? Enough death? Can we not try another way?"

The remaining Quorum exchanged glances that could only be called ashamed. Then, gradually, one by one, they broke ranks with the other Souls and joined the other defecting Quorum members. Comforter Benjamin, his thin body with its bushy white hair, was the last to join. Yielding to the others, he shifted uncomfortably before Jade. "Please Seeker Jade," he pleaded, "there must be some alternatives."

Jade agitatedly tossed her head back and forth on her slender neck. She twisted from the Souls protecting the Humans, back to the Seekers at her back, who were growing increasing bewildered, and finally back to Wanda and the others. "No...No, this is not right. This Quorum is corrupted. We can't allow these Humans to run free."

Wanda had been so stunned by this eleventh-hour surprise support that she had been rendered speechless. She almost dared not hope she might be successful. Her whole body felt like she had just run an extended marathon. Rallying what strength she had, Wanda again spoke to the crowd. "I know there had been much pain and loss. Far more than any of our kind can normally endure. But if you will listen to me, I will tell you of what I've seen and learned. We can coexist, it is possible. We can prevent further deaths for both races."

At first it was just one or two people, usually a Healer or support staff of the hospital, who crossed over to the line. Turning from spectator to a protector. But soon there was a steady stream of Souls forming a line between the Seekers and the remaining rebel Humans. And the line was rapidly evolving from a thin row of a few bodies to a wall of people. All of them stood, shoulder to
shoulder, facing down the Seekers. The surge of exultation poured through Wanda and she struggled from jumping up and down with relief and joy.

Now the Seekers were outnumbered and their neat columns of black uniformed soldiers began to lose cohesion as they anxiously glanced between themselves and their defiant Soul brethren. Sensing she was rapidly losing control of the situation, Jade jerked back and forth frantically looking for something or someone in the throng of bodies. With her small size, her efforts were made difficult with the number of taller people. Yet she did find who she was looking for because suddenly she cried out. "Seeker Sage? What do we do?"

Wanda followed Jade's gazed and was rocked by who she saw. With her blonde hair pulled into a simple ponytail, the slim, athletic body of Bright Moon on Fallen Snow stood away from both the Seekers and Wanda's swelling side. Her arms were crossed, and she had a faintly displeased frown on her face. Wanda was uncertain if she had just walked up or had been here the entire time, hidden in the crowd. At Jade's call, she unfolded her arms and began to move.

With a growing concern for the friend, Wanda asked tentatively, "Seeker Bright Moon?"

"I'm afraid not, Wanderer," replied the woman as she stopped before Jade and Wanda. She wore an expression of wistful weariness, it almost made her look apologetic for the unfolding events. Before Wanda could question her further, she turned to the small Seeker woman. "Jade, this isn't going to work. We've misunderstood the situation here. We will only cause more suffering if we continue on this path of action."

"But Sage," replied Jade in an irritable sulk that bordered on a whine, "the Humans. We can't just let them go."

The blonde woman nodded. "I'm not saying we do. But we also don't need to be cruel." With a very faint smile she added, "We are, after all, still Souls."

Even as she was growing confident of her success in stopping the Seekers, Wanda was now increasing worried what had happened to Bright Moon. It was apparent to her that the Soul Bright Moon on Fallen Snow had been removed from her host. Jade had called her Sage. It was not a name Wanda was familiar with. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Seeker Sage of Tides," she answered briskly. "And it would appear, Wanderer, we have much to talk about."
"Heads up people, we've got a bugger inbound."

Jodi scooted around the edge of the reception desk to take her position behind the Formica countertop at Samantha's warning. Almost subconsciously she could feel a needling like tension build in her body as the parasite drew near. Sitting down in the chair behind the desk, Jodi took a deep breath to steady herself. She could do this, it was fine. Already she had played this role four times today and each time the aliens had been completely fooled. This time would not be any different.

Behind Jodi, Samantha and her assistant Denis pulled themselves into the nearby examination room and the prepared to make their planned capture. Nearby, playing the role of waiting patients, Carol and Jake took their seats in the waiting room. This time the gun in Jake's belt was completely hidden by his shirt. Last time he had not been so careful and Jodi had to improvise quickly to distract the young couple before they noticed and things went wrong.

As the main doors to the hospital open and a young man entered, Jodi plastered a broad, cheerful smile on her face. To Jodi, her smile felt very fake and forced, but so far the Souls had not taken notice. They were all one big happy family and they were always pleased to see each other. Upon seeing her behind the desk, the man pulled on his own happy grin.

"Hello," said Jodi disarmingly as their latest would-be recruit walked up the desk. He was young, or at least his body was youthful, there was no easy way to tell about the Soul possessing him. In Jodi's quick appraisal, he was around eighteen. The hint of lingering adolescence in his face and his still a little too narrow shoulders. Light sandy colored hair covered his head in a thick wavy band that began to curl just past his ears.

Placing his hands on the desk he leaned forward and his smile turned to a slightly perplexed expression on his boyish face. "Hi," he began a bit tentatively, "I'm Hue of the Crimson Light. I received a rather odd message from my healer, Azure Waves. It said for me to meet her all the way out here."

Jodi delivered her carefully rehearsed line. "So nice to meet you Hue of the Crimson Light. I'm Jodi. I think I know what happened. We had a little mix up with the computers today. A few of the Azure Waves' files got crossed with one of our Healers out here." She put on a very convincing act of looking upset. With a small pout she added, "I'm so sorry you drove all the way out here to Banning."

"Oh, you can just call me Hue," said the Soul with a return of his amiable smile. "It was kind of fun driving out here. I'm still learning my way around." He paused as if coming to some sort of decision and then leaned in closer to her. "Actually, Jodi, I can't say it was a wasted trip since I'm getting to meet you."

Hue's smile was still friendly and polite, but Jodi noticed just the smallest hint of teasing in his hazel eyes with their alien shimmer of silver. Those eyes ran an ever so slight provocative glance over her body. The parasite was flirting with her, albeit a bit awkwardly. Feeling a wave of disgust and anger build in her, Jodi pushed away from the desk with a jerk.

"Umm, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been rude," blanched Hue as he too pulled back from Jodi's negative reaction.
As much as she felt sickened by the alien ogling her, Jodi's response was also a matter of practicality. The fluorescent bulbs in the office had been subtly altered to lower the ambient light in the room. Lessening the chance of making the silver in the aliens' eyes glow. But if Hue started looking close enough he would notice her dark eyes did not shine like his. Jodi blew out a calming breath, she did not need to fool him for long, just long enough to get some information before Samantha went to work.

Hue's face was reddening like his name and Jodi managed to put on another disarming smile. The parasite was in a young male body and hormones were hormones, Jodi told herself. He was following his body's instincts. She needed to play along until the body's real owner could be recovered. Spinning a lie quickly, Jodi pulled from Sunlight Passing through the Ice's memories. She needed the right words. "No, I'm sorry, Hue. I'm uhh…flattered, but I've got a partner."

Embarrassment still filed Hue's young face, but a trickle of a smile returned. Hanging his head he said morosely, "Still I'm sorry, Jodi." He shook his head with faint bemusement. "These bodies can sometimes be so challenging. I've been here for three years and still I have trouble."

"Think nothing of it," replied Jodi hurriedly, hoping to get on with this ridiculous charade. "Again, I'm sorry you had to come out all this way. I hope we're not taking you away from anything important?"

"Oh, nothing too serious," answered Hue gamely. "Today's my day off from work, so I was just going to finish some unpacking."

Although she had already known a bit about Hue, per information gathered by Samantha, Jodi played innocent. "Oh, did you just move?"

"Yes, I just transferred down from San Francisco. Took a job at LAX as an electrician." Bringing his hands up, Hue tapped his fingers in the air as though he was working on an invisible piece of electronics. "I do so love to work my hands."

"That's wonderful," said Jodi as she enforced her fake smile. "Moved here by yourself?"

"Yes," came a slightly dejected reply from Hue as he put his hands down. "Everyone has been so nice and I'm making lots of friends at work. But still..." He trailed off and again gave Jodi a lightly longing look and then quickly glanced away.

'So the parasite wants to hook up,' thought Jodi blandly. It seemed a horny teenage body could almost trump a Soul's usual polite and reserved good manners. She was reasonably sure this was why Samantha had put her into this position. A pretty face to distract some of the male buggers. Well, she had played this game long enough, she had the answers they needed. No one would immediately miss Hue when he stopped being Hue. She discreetly glanced at Jake and saw the man nod, it was time to see if it was going to be the easy way or the hard.

"Well Hue," said Jodi sweetly while giving Hue her most harmless guise. "Since you've come all this way, why don't you have one of our Healers give you a quick look over? Never can be too safe."

Hue frowned and the twisting of his lips did not look like it belonged on his adolescent face. "Well, thanks, Jodi, but honestly I don't feel like there is anything wrong with my body. I hate to waste the Healers time."

"Oh it's really not a problem," offered Jodi. In the corner of her vision, she saw Jake and Carol shift in their seats. Getting ready to move if needed. But Jodi was willing to keep trying. "I mean we're
really the ones to blame. We're the ones wasting your time." With a tilt of her head and letting her smile become coy she added, "Maybe you just ask the Healer Sparkles for a spare tube of NO PAIN or HEAL. She always likes to be helpful."

Hue ran a hand through his thick sandy hair and grew thoughtful. "Hmm, that does sound like a good idea. I suppose there's no harm in getting a few supplies."

Glancing around the waiting area, Hue's eyes briefly landing on the other two people in the room. "Should I just wait over here?" he asked, pointing to an empty chair.

"Not at all," said Jodi as she stood up. "Just follow me."

Hue followed obediently after Jodi and they only had to take a handful of steps till they reached the examination room. Gesturing with her hand she indicated the apparently empty room. "Right in here, Hue."

"Thank you, Jodi," replied Hue with a friendly nod of his head as he walked into the room.

Jodi did not watch him enter. She remained standing stock-still when the door suddenly swung close with a slam. Nor did she move when she heard Hue's startled words – "Healer Azure Waves!" Or, on the heels of his outburst, when he gave a frightened yelp. And then silence. After a few more moments the door swung open again and Samantha Greer moved to stand in the doorway. Behind her, Jodi saw Denis standing over the body of Hue of the Crimson Light. Hue looked like he was peacefully sleeping.

"Nice job, Jodi," offered Samantha.

"Yeah," came Jake's voice from around the corner as he and Carol made their way from the waiting room. Entering the hallway Jake shot Jodi an amused smirk. "But 'Healer Sparkles,' really?"

Jodi shrugged and with a snort replied, "I don't know, just made it up on the fly. For all I know that's a real name for these things."

"Well, the only thing that matters is it bought your story," said Jake. He entered the room and with help from Denis picked up the body and placed it on the gurney which stood empty near the far wall.

Carol, with short hair feathered out around her head with the color of smoldered ash, strolled up next to Jodi. "You're getting good at this dear." She threw an arm around Jodi and hugged her close. Her lined face gained extra wrinkles as she twisted it with disgust. "You held it together well, I saw how that worm was eyeing you."

"Ugh, don't remind me," said Jodi with a sigh. Carol gave her an extra squeeze in sympathy and then released her. Jodi knew should not have been so upset by the parasite's harmless flirting. Hue would never have acted on his desires in an inappropriate way. But just the thought of the alien worm controlling the body, commanding its hands to touch her like some sort of perverted puppet master had her skin crawling.

Now that the excitement of their latest capture was over she relaxed the inner tension that came whenever she was near one of the parasites. Absentmindedly she ran her hand through her dark curly hair, she let it brush across her own insertion scar. Just below the surface of her skin, hidden behind muscles in her neck, lay the sleeping centipede-like body of Sunlight Passing through the Ice. Jodi so wished she could get rid of the thing. Sunlight's memories were of little value to their
cause. The parasite had been a sort of artist, not a Seeker or a Healer. She could not care less about
It's time among the alien Bears and their ice carvings or the stupid paintings It had made while
controlling her body. More than six years of her life stolen and a great deal of it seemed such an
utter waste.

But then Jodi came to the gray area in her mind, an odd gap in the parasite's memories. She felt
along the edges of this blank space, like running her hand along the wall in a darkened room,
feeling for a light switch. Yet nothing returned from her probing. Samantha and the others assured
her that everything would come back in about a day. But after nearly three days the memories had
still not returned. Jodi had worked out the gap covered at least several months, from living with
parents in Las Vegas till her recovery by Jeremy. What had Sunlight been doing during this time?
Where had the parasite taken her? There were a few clues, fresh calluses on her hands and her
shoes were scuffed with a purplish dirt. Doctor Richards and that sour faced Smith had examined
her with a slew of medical devices and could not find anything wrong with her.

"Coming Jodi?" asked Samantha, interrupting Jodi's private ruminations. The woman fixed her with
a hard stare as the others wheeled the gurney out of the little examination room.

Jodi shook herself out of her daze. "Umm...yeah."

Following after Samantha and the others, Jodi pass through two wide double doors, going deeper
into the heart of the building. As Jake and Denis steered the gurney down the hallway, making
their way towards the recovery area, Jodi looked around at the busy hospital. San Gorgonio
Memorial Hospital was rapidly transforming from a Soul healing center to the base of operation for
the Human rebels. Jodi was not sure just how many people had been freed in the last few days, but
there had to be at least thirty people working away at various tasks on this floor alone. Like her,
many were devoted to capturing Souls and freeing the Humans. But others were assigned to tasks
Jodi knew little about.

A flurry of activity bustled around Jodi as she turned into recovery zone. Previous hospital rooms
had been converted into accommodations for the recently cured. Most people woke up as
themselves in about an hour, but sometimes the process of miraculous CURE required extra time.
They would awake like Jodi had, confused and disorientated. Sometimes they remembered their
original name, but more often than not they had to slowly recall who they had been before.

As Jodi passed a room, she glanced in and saw a middle-aged woman sitting on a bed. An
attractive woman with golden blonde hair, high cheekbones, and a slim, graceful figure, she could
have easily been a model. She was opening weeping, soft sobs came from her as two other women
in the room tried to console her. The tears would pass, mused Jodi as she continued walking along.
The fear and doubt would fade and only their righteous anger would remain.

Down near the end of the hallway someone rushed in, coming from another set of double doors.
The darkly tanned man quickly scanned the busy corridor and his eyes lit up when he saw her.
"Hey, Jodi!" he cried out.

Jodi felt the smile come to her face. "Hi, Jeremy, what's up?" She had not seen much of the man
since two days ago. He had been out on mission, something a bit top secret, and Jodi found herself
happy to see him again.

He jogged up to her, rapidly maneuvering around people in the busy hallway. Jodi noticed he was
wearing a uniform worn by a Seeker. His dark black dress pants were dirty and sweaty and the
lapel on his jacket was torn.

"Are you okay?" asked Jodi, alarmed at his condition.
Jeremy's breaths came in hard pants and he had to take a moment to catch his breath. "Nah, I'm fine," he replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "But I need some help, can you..." and he broke off and quickly scanned the area. He rotated around to find Samantha and the others, who were working to lift the unconscious Hue into a nearby bed.

"Hey, Samantha, can I borrow Jodi and Denis for a quick minute?" queried Jeremy.

Putting her hands on her hips, Samantha surveyed their latest capture. "Sure," she answered, "were done here."

"Great," said Jeremy with a simple nod. "You two with me." And with that he was running back down the corridor. Denis gave her a "what-are-you-going-to-do" shrug and started after the rapidly moving Jeremy.

Jodi had to break into an outright run to catch up with the two men. "Wait, where are we going?" she panted.

"Out back," came Jeremy's reply as they headed down a short flight of stairs. Jodi realized they were heading for the hospital's small garage area. When she had been brought to the hospital two days before she had briefly glimpsed the repair shop where two ambulances were stored. Now following after Jeremy and Denis she saw there was only one of the red and white emergency vehicles and it was surrounded by a group of darkly dressed men and women.

'Seekers...' whispered a frighten thought in Jodi's mind and her body froze in place as she stood gaping at the enemy soldiers.

Jeremy and Denis had already joined the group around the ambulance and Jeremy was waving his hands animatedly around. It appeared to Jodi like he was reenacting some sort of action movie scene. Shaping his right hand like a mock pistol he acted out some type of gun battle. Someone in the crowd swore, their curse swelled with amazement at his story. Jeremy smiled and said something Jodi could not hear and a round of laughter came from the men and the women gathered.

With a quick flare of annoyance Jodi pushed her frightened thoughts away and forced her stuck feet to move again. Of course, these people were not Seekers. They were all Humans, only dressed as the alien soldiers. Camouflaged for their work beyond the safety of the hospital in the world of the Souls. Odd she would lock up so suddenly. Trying to shake off her lingering fear, she crossed the remaining distance to the group of surrounding the ambulance.

"...Man, you should have seen Williams," said Jeremy as Jodi came into earshot. His words came in an energetic burst of excitement. "Those three Seekers didn't stand a chance. That last one just had this stunned expression on his face, like - Why do have a gun? Why are you shooting me?"

"Now Jeremy don't be exaggerating," came a new voice, one unfamiliar to Jodi. There was a slight southern twang to the speaker. Looking around the group she sought to find the source. It did not take her long to find the owner, half-sitting, half-leaning on the rear bumper of the truck while a woman in a white coat worked on dressing a bloody wound on his right shoulder. The man made a small tilting of his head towards his injury. "He still managed to get one off before I put him down."

He was maybe in his middle forties, judged Jodi, but it was hard to tell as his dark hair was cut in a short crewcut. With his shirt rolled up, the exposed skin on his right arm bulged with compact muscle. Where his skin that was not blood-stained looked like beaten leather, tough and worn as if had been exposed to harsh environments for long periods. Everything about him, in Jodi's opinion,
from his body's well-developed build to the way he composed himself screamed military.

"That's why we need to keep our focus," said the man gravely as he looked at the group of gathered men and women. "We've had a lot of early successes, mostly because the parasites aren't expecting us. But that will change, and when it does things are going to turn nasty," he warned sternly. There were solemn nods from all gathered.

The doctor working on his wounded arm applied a large dap of HEAL and then SEAL to the jagged bleeding puncture. Within a few moments, the medicines had worked to leave nothing but a rough pink circle on his arm. And when the woman applied a small amount of SMOOTH, even the scar faded.

"Appreciate that Marge," said the military man as he flexed his newly healed arm. Then pulling himself off the bumper he once again surveyed the surrounding group of false Seekers. "Everyone did really well out there." There were quiet murmurs of appreciation from the small crowd.

In the midst turning around to the ambulance's back doors, he caught sight of Jodi and paused. He peered at her searchingly, his gaze penetrating. "Ahh," he said with a slow nod of his head after a few seconds, "you must be that girl we pulled in with our sweep of the Seekers in San Bernardino."

"Yes, I'm..." but Jodi trailed off midsentence as she caught sight of this man's eyes. They were a deep blue, like a shade of blue found in the deep ocean. But the blue was not what caused the words to stick in her throat. It was the shimmering rings of silver in his eyes.

"You're...You're a..." gulped Jodi.

"It's okay," said Jeremy, suddenly at her side. "Sorry, I forgot you've not met Craig Williams before. He's human."

Jodi found herself stupefied by Jeremy's statement. Still staring bug-eyed at Williams, she asked, "But your eyes...how?"

"Ah, my baby blue eyes," said Williams with a mild smile. "I got those from my mother. But if you're asking about the silver...that's a bit more complicated."

And a strange thought came to Jodi suddenly. "Contacts?" she wondered aloud.

"Affraid not," replied Williams. With a wave of his hand towards his face he explained. "Surgery, not all that different from that LASIK stuff they used to do fix people's vision. Makes for some funky haloes in your vision when you stare at bright lights." With a sigh he added, "But it beats the alternative way of getting the shiny eyes."

"Now," said Williams sternly as he turned from Jodi, who still stood awkwardly, stunned by his appearance. "We need to get this ambulance unloaded ASAP and ready to get back out there." He pulled on the doors and they swung opened. Inside the emergency vehicle in a large pile were more than half a dozen rectangular black bags.

It took a few more moments for Jodi to identify the oblong ebony sacks. To recognize the bags with the zipper that ran down the center of the wrinkled plastic. 'Body bags,' thought Jodi numbly. Still at her side, Jeremy took her hand, and Jodi realized she was trembling.

"What happened?"

With his face set as a tightly controlled mask that mixed equal parts anger and sadness, Jeremy answered, "There were complications."
"Do we have containment?" asked Smith as he rubbed his face.

It was clear the man was not getting anywhere near enough sleep. Dark circles hung under his eyes and pale almost white whiskers were showing on his unshaven face. Outwardly Smith still carried himself with his ever present stony, detached manner. But his exhaustion was causing his mask to slip every so often. When it did fall, it was clear to see the man was actually like a coiled spring, ready to explode at any moment. In Craig’s opinion, the man really needed to learn to relax.

"Of course," replied Williams gamely. He leaned back against the file cabinet in Doctor Robert Richard's small office and made a breezy wave of his hand. "Our little ambush didn't go so well. But we're remote enough no one else was around. Now, how long before someone goes looking for those Seekers, tough to say. A day or two at most."

"I can work out a cover story," suggested Samantha. The woman sat with her arms folded in one of the chairs they managed to squeeze into the room for this emergency meeting. "I've got enough ex-Healers and access to the parasite's health records to confuse anyone going looking for them. But even so, it will generate a fair amount of concern."

Craig studied Samantha Greer silently. He really wanted to like the woman. She was good at this, working to covertly sabotage the parasites' carefully shaped society. Finding cracks in their apparently perfect record keeping. But he hated her name, too much of a reminder of his past. The name Samantha invoked golden tresses and the happy laughter of a child. And then almost on cue images of his daughter flashed into his mind, a sunny memory of him pushing her on a swing when she was four. Such a lovely time.

Biting down on his tongue in frustration, Craig shoved the golden-haired Samantha back down into the dark recesses of his conscious and focused on the meeting. The echo of what once was Pale Light Glimming rustled in those dark pits of his mind as it greedily grabbed on to anything Craig sent its way in its dark prison. He began to relax his jaw or else he would draw blood and that would not do. He still had to keep up appearances.

"Alright, do it," came Smith's voice as Craig pulled his attention back to the meeting. "It will buy us enough time to handle the remaining Seekers. By the time the parasites start catching on, we'll be in a much better position to do deal with them." The others nodded and Smith shifted his gaze back to his ever-present tablet computer. With a soft sigh, Smith asked his next question. It was one word. "Jodi?"

"She says she still doesn't know where she's been," replied Samantha. At seeing Smith's face begin to tighten unhappily, she shrugged in frustration. "What do you want me to say, Smith? She doesn't remember. No memories of where she's been for the last nine months."

"Could she be suppressing some sort of trauma?" asked Joe Tanner leaning on the corner desk. "Something her parasite couldn't handle?"

"Her disappearance as Sunlight Passing through the Ice in Las Vegas was thought to have been the work of Human rebels," explained Robert. He rubbed his chin as he considered Joe's theory. "If that's true it's at least feasible her parasite underwent something so traumatic by Humans that even Jodi can't access the memories."

"Still," pondered Joe, "doesn't explain how she ended up here in California."
"You haven't told Jodi any of this?" asked Smith to Samantha.

The raven haired woman shook head. "Nope, I've held back telling her what we know. Hoping her memories return on their own."

"We are neglecting one possibility," said Robert. All eyes shifted to the doctor and he cautiously began to explain. "The parasite attached to Jodi might be able to still influencing her, maybe on a subconscious level."

Robert shifted his gaze to rest on Smith. "I only know what you've told me about this…medication we are using." The doctor shifted uncomfortably in his seat and added, "Are we sure we understand all the repercussions of using this…CURE?" The man swallowed nervously and went on, "Some of the side effects we've seen…" There was a long pause from everyone around the room while the former Human hosts shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

Smith breathed in and out and Craig could see the man was struggling to keep his mask of confidence in place. "Bob, I know there have been a few… irregularities," said Smith awkwardly, working to calm the others' fears. "I'm consulting with our science team back at our headquarters. With the data we've gathered from those recovered we'll be able to perfect the process. You'll see."

Doctor Richards blinked once and then slowly nodded. Joe and Samantha exchanged a look of reluctant acceptance and also nodded. Smith turned to Samantha and said purposefully, "Continue to keep Jodi under watch, tell me if anything changes."

With a roll of her eyes at Smith's command, Samantha nodded. "Of course I will. But she's been doing good work for us. It wasn't a mistake to bring her back."

"No one is saying that," said Smith irritably, his voice losing a little bit of its composure. "But I need her kept under watch until we know her whole story." Straining up, Smith pulled from some deep reserve and managed to look actually pleased. "I know this hard, all of you have been working around the clock. Don't worry, our time is coming."

It was not the most uplifting of motivational talks, consider Craig, but everyone in the room already had plenty of incentive. With several million alien parasites in Los Angeles Basin area, they had all the motivation anyone ever needed. With their meeting over, Robert, Joe, and Samantha rose and silently walked out the door. Smith watched them go, an unreadable expression on his tired face.

After they had left, Craig walked over to the door to the office, closed it, and then locked it. "So," he said with a smirk, "just what does our young Alex and his freaky friends have to say about our…irregularities?"

Smith pointedly ignored Craig's barb. Turing to his tablet computer he reviewed its screen for several moments before reluctantly handing it over to the other man. "We have another problem," said Smith. "Our 'friends' in Chicago are making waves."

Craig glanced at the screen, it was the latest field report from the Facility. Studying the text for a full minute, Craig had to admit at finding himself more than a little surprised. "Can't say I saw that coming," he said as he handed the tablet back to Smith. "I would have thought Marc and his little crew would have had the good sense to get the hell out of the city weeks ago. Or failing to do that, the Seekers would be reliable enough to stomp them out."

Smith snorted with dark amusement. "Apparently the Souls and Marc's band of holdouts are having a Kumbaya moment up in the windy city."
"Well, that's certainly not going to last once we get this project under way," replied Williams.

"No, it's not. But I need to keep this information quiet," argued Smith. He pointed to the locked door, but his meaning to the people in the hospital beyond was clear. "Here it would just...confuse people."

Craig weighed his responses before answering. He decided to go for broke and be more than a little blunt. "You sure about that?" he questioned. "Maybe a few of them like old Bob would care, but I think a lot of them would shrug it off and go right back to work."

"I don't know about that," said Smith uncertainly.

"Smith, how much of their original personalities remain?" Craig fixed Smith with a hard stare before resuming, "Trust me, as someone who knows what it's like to be hollowed out and be a shell of a man."

"How should I know?" snapped Smith, his structured mask beginning to crack. "It's not like I knew any of these people before they were turned into Hosts."

"So," said Craig as he settled down in the chair previously occupied by Bob. "What exactly are our plans when someone brings their parasite infected kids in? Our little miracle CURE doesn't work so hot on someone who's been a host their entire life. How are we going to explain that?"

"How about you worry about getting the remaining Seekers," growled Smith as he glared down at Craig. "And let me worry about what we'll tell people until after we've completed our mission."

He returned his gaze to his computer but the man's jaw continued to clench in irritation. "Why the hell," began Smith again, unable to keep his anger in check. "do you think we focus on getting specific individuals? The last thing we need is to be dragging whole families into this mess. Our recovery rates are already getting shaky."

Craig shrugged disinterestedly. He did not really care much for their supposed mission, he had his own agenda. For now he aligned with Smith and the others' plans. Their CURE was useful, but it was only the first step in Craig's ambitions. The world was in need of reshaping and Craig Williams knew he was the right man to guide everyone to a better future.

"Just saying we're playing with fire here," said Craig casually.

With a broad swing of his hand, Smith indicated the growing army of people outside the door. "They're Human and they'll do what we say," he announced with supreme confidence. "That's all that's important."

"If you say so," replied Craig.

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"So, Seekers took acting classes to learn how to...lie?" asked Jodi as she rustled through a bag of chips. She managed to pull a few bland yellow pieces out and then quickly down the salty snack. Next to her Jeremy worked on his own bag of pretzels. He munched away at his food while his eyes locked onto something far away. Jodi could tell he was playing through the memories of his parasite, Jeremy always had a faint look of disgust when he was reviewing the mind of Seeker Bending Reeds.
The hospital's cafeteria was busy today, reflected Jodi as she looked around. With their recent batch of new recruits, there were more than forty people sitting at the tables and enjoying their meals. While they lacked a proper staff to prepare food, a few people were trying their hand at cooking on the lunch room's stove with varying levels of success. Laughter bubbled up as someone tried the latest concoction to come from their efforts.

Spotting the woman she saw before in the recovery ward at a nearby table, Jodi gave her a quick smile. No longer crying she was really was quite attractive in Jodi's estimation. It was southern California after all, maybe she really was a model or some sort of actress. She returned Jodi's smile with uncertain one of her own. She still carried a look of wide-eyed astonishment of what had happened to her.

"It's not so much how to lie," said Jeremy. Jodi's attention was pulled back to the man sitting next to her. It felt…nice to be near him. He took a sip of water before going on. "It's more like the parasite's needed to learn how to lie convincingly. If you remember most of them are awful at it."

Jodi did indeed know. Sunlight Passing through the Ice could not have lied her way out of a wet paper sack. The whole concept of telling a falsehood would likely have made her sob like a baby. While Jodi was by no means a pathological liar, she could scarcely image going through life with the naïve absolute honesty of the Souls.

"Yeah," she nodded agreeably. She paused as she tried to make sense of the foreign memories in her mind. "But…I mean, how do you get Seekers from the Souls? I mean most of them can't even grasp the concept of fighting."

Jeremy's dusky face clouded into an even darker shade, rage rose in his response. "Because they think what they're doing is for the greater good," he fumed. "They believe they're the greatest thing in the whole universe. So it's okay if a few of them have to crack some heads to bring their peace to a people they consider a bunch of ignorant savages." His hands tightened into fists. "Their entire invasion…they honestly thought they were doing us a favor."

She saw just how much thinking about what the Souls had done angered him. Jodi reached out a gently rubbed Jeremy's still clenched hand. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you angry."

He flushed again, but this time not out of anger. A small smile managed to work its way onto his face. "It's alright, I'm not angry with you." Letting out a loud exhale of air, Jeremy's smile grew self-conscious. "I mean, I was supposed to be getting your mind off…you know…the ambulance."

"It's okay," said Jodi and she felt like she was only lying a little. She had never seen a dead body before, especially not ones that had been shot at close range with automatic weapons. It had troubled her at first, a sickly feeling when dealing with the still warm bodies. But it had not lasted long. Now, sitting here with Jeremy, she did not feel distressed about it at all. In the end, it was only Seekers who had been killed. Parasites who would have been more than happy to kill her and all her new friends, all in the name of the greater good.

Jeremy's hand relaxed slowly while his bashful smile remained. Jodi could feel her lips moving to mirror his. Her hand was small, almost tiny in his larger palm. He began to rub the top of her fingers with the edge of his thumb. Leaning in towards her his voice was warm and pleasant. "You know," he murmured, "rescuing you might not have been part of the plan, but I'm glad I did."

Jodi was pretty sure she was blushing, but she did not mind at all. It seemed even after the end of the world there was still the possibility of love. She liked the way Jeremy held her hand. The soft, gentle touch of his strong fingers. It was just like when Kyle had held her hand the first time they had gone to the movies.
She froze. Her heart skipped several beats. With his hand still on hers, Jeremy felt her stiffen. His eyes grew concerned. "Jodi, what's wrong?"

Kyle. Kyle O'Shea. The college soccer star who had followed her around like a lost puppy for a week until she finally agreed to go out with him. How had she forgotten him?

"Umm," uttered Jodi unhelpfully to Jeremy's growing worry. Her mind was spinning with lost memories that were sending her emotions on a roller coaster. Kyle O'Shea, the big lughead of a jock who worked his way into her heart. Kyle O'Shea, who had driven her to the airport on her ill-fated trip to her grandparents. Kyle O'Shea, the man she was certain was going to ask her to marry him when she returned.

"Jodi," asked Jeremy, apprehension crawling across his face as his forehead wrinkled. "Really, what's wrong? You're kind of freaking me out."

"I-I need to go the bathroom," replied Jodi as she awkwardly pushed herself up from her seat. She was out and moving before Jeremy could make a response. She heard him call after her, but she was already pushing through the cafeteria doors.

In the nearby restroom, Jodi splashed water on her face from the sink as she fought to get her careening thoughts and feelings under control. Except for the gap in her memory, everything else had returned to her. Or so she had thought. All her memories of Kyle had been locked away and she had completely forgotten him. Now like a bolt of lightning striking in her mind, they were all back.

Jodi slowed her breathing and tried think through this with some manner of logic. She remembered Kyle taking her to the airport. That was the last time she could definitely remember him. Remember his burning kiss. She touched her lips, almost felt like she could still feel his lips on hers. But that had been years ago. Or had it? Some part of her felt like she had just seen Kyle only days ago.

Staring into the bathroom's mirror Jodi whispered loudly to her reflection, "What's happening to me?"
"Yes dear Leaves Above, it is me."

"Oh Pretty Petals, I'm so glad to find you again after all this time."

On the TV screen, the two Soul actors came together, wrapping their arms around each other tightly. Their embrace was delivered with same stiff awkwardness as their lines. The performers were playing the role of two long lost Soul friends finding themselves on Earth after being separated from each other on the world of the Flowers. The whole movie had played out as the two Souls comically kept just missing each other as they went about their new lives as Humans. Only at the very end of the movie, just when Pretty Petals was about to move across the country did she by chance run into Leaves Above at the airport.

As the Souls surrounding the couple cheered at the reunited friends, the credits for the movie began to roll. Sitting forward on the couch, with her arm propping her head up, Mia let out a groan. "Ugh, that was sooo boring."

Standing in the hospital waiting room's doorway the Seeker watching Mia crossed her arms and let out an annoyed sigh. "You wished to watch something on TV, that movie was what was available." Her name was Amber Pains, or Trains, or something - Mia honestly had not been paying attention when the woman had introduced herself.

"It was stupid," shot back Mia. She slumped on the couch and said testily. "I would rather watch one of Brother Eric's crazy Japanese cartoons. At least they have some action in them."

"I'm certain you would," sniffed the Seeker dismissively. "I can only image the inappropriate materials the others of your kind allowed you to watch."

Mia pulled herself up enough on the couch to look Amber Grains directly in the eye. "Exactly!" she said as she recalled one of the animated shows Eric enjoyed watching. "Like, there was this one with a boy who was trying to sneak a peak in the girls' shower. Only, a girl found him out and hit him in the head with a baseball bat. And then zombies invaded the school."

"That's horrible," came the Seeker's repulsed response at Mia's narrative.

"It was funny," countered Mia.

Amber Brains twisted her head back and forth, letting her shoulder length dark hair brush about. Then her brow wrinkled and the rest of her face remained filled with disgust, apparently unable to shake Mia's dreadful description. Letting out another annoyed sigh, she turned away from the door frame.

Mia could easily tell the Seeker did not enjoy being assigned to watch over her. Still, she did monitor Mia carefully, a source of considerable irritation to the teenage Mia. She chafed at the idea of a babysitter. It had not been so bad the day before. Mia had spent most of her time playing with little Alexis. At only four years old, Alexis did not really understand much of what was happening, only that she missed her mother and father. She knew enough to be afraid of the Seekers, something that had been drilled into her at the earliest age. As such, Alexis would begin to cry as soon as one of the dark uniformed Souls came near. Thus, Mia had taken to watching over
Alexis and it helped her distract herself from being surrounded by Souls that nearly sent her whole body twitching when they came to close.

Then earlier today Brother Marc had come to visit them. He had pulled both Mia and Alexis into a tight hug and told them the others of their little clan were safe. It had been a welcoming surprise for both girls. Ever since bright eyes Wanda's little insurrection, neither of them had known much of what was going on. They were official 'guests' of the Seekers. This amounted to being sequestered in a closed-off wing of the hospital while the Seekers and Wanda's supporters discussed what they were going to do with the Humans.

Mia had seen the apparent stress and fatigue in Marc's tall frame, he looked like he had not slept in days. Never the less, he was clearly happy at seeing the girls. He reported things were going well, or as well as it could be expected with the Seekers. And he brought happy news that Sarah's baby had been born. Now Alexis was off visiting her mother and her new little brother. There had been some sort of commotion about his birth, apparently he had gone missing shortly after he had been born. Mia did not know many details, apparently it was some scheme concocted by Marc and it had driven the Seekers crazy trying to find the infant. As much as Mia would like to have seen this chaos, she was glad that Sarah and her children were now safe and reunited. Even if it did mean she had little to do and was now very bored. But Mia had a plan to change that.

On the TV another Soul soap opera was starting. However, Mia was paying little attention. She covertly glanced out the door to where Amber Whatshername was talking with another Seeker. Then a quick glance at the clock on the wall. It was nearly time. Mia knew Marc and Wanda would want her to play nice and cooperate with the Seekers. But Mia was beyond caring. She wanted…No, she needed to get away from these Souls. Their closeness was causing a relentless itching through her body, driving her to the point of madness.

Getting off the sofa, Mia crossed to the doorway. Outside the waiting room lay an empty nursing station. Most of this area had been cleared out by the Seekers. The few Souls present were all Seekers. Even if the hospital was to be the Humans new safe haven, the Seekers seemed determined to keep the general public as far away as possible.

Very softly Mia spoke up, "Umm, Amber Drains, I need to go to the bathroom."

"It's Amber Rains," replied the Seeker woman with another annoyed sigh.

"Sorry," said Mia apologetically. She tried a very mild smile to sell her sincerity to the Seeker.

Amber Rains excused herself from the other man and led Mia to the nearby woman's bathroom. On previous visits, Mia had found the restroom to be a small room with only one toilet. The Seekers would afford Mia enough privacy to let her be in the room by herself. The perfect opportunity for Mia to initiate her plan.

"Do not delay," informed Amber Rains as Mia pushed the door open.

"Right," agreed Mia cheerfully as the door swung shut behind her.

When the door was closed, Mia went directly to the bathroom sink. The sink was a simple wash basin with a rectangular mirror above it. A soap dispenser next to the mirror and then a neat little pile of folded paper towels sitting next on the flat surface near the faucet. Nothing the Seekers would consider a potential weapon. Mia grabbed a fist full of the paper towels from the sink and began to wad them up into a tight, compact roll. Once she was finished, she turned about and dropped the compress brown ball into the toilet. Waiting a few moments while the paper towels soaked in the water and turned into a bloated mess, Mia then flushed the toilet.
"Oh dear," said Mia flatly to herself as the toilet tried and failed to suck down the waterlogged gob of paper. Flushing again and the soggy brown paper managed to disappear down the drain, but now the water in the bowl began to swell.

Opening the bathroom door, Mia pushed a sorrowful expression on her face. "I'm sorry," she said meekly to a waiting Amber Rains, "but the toilet is backed up."

"What? Let me see," demanded the Seeker. She walked into the bathroom, her heels clicking on the tiled floor. Surveying the clogged toilet clinically, Amber Rains then turned back to Mia, her eyes narrowing. "Did you do something to the lavatory?"

"What's a lavatory?" asked Mia innocently.

"Never mind," came Amber Rains annoyed reply. She turned briskly and added, "Follow me."

Mia kept the smile from growing on her face and followed dutifully after the Seeker. Now came the tricky bit. If Amber Rains went to the next nearest bathroom, by Mia's estimation, she would be taking them outside the Seekers quarantine. But if she were committed to keeping Mia away from the other Souls then she would lead them deeper into the secluded wing of the hospital.

"You will not talk to anyone when you go to the bathroom," announced Amber Rains as they walked past several big and silent Seekers guarding this section of the hospital.

"Of course," replied Mia quietly. Internally she was jumping for joy.

There were a few Souls gathered in the adjoining hallway, busy with their own work and they paid little attention to the Seeker or Mia as they approached the door to this floors women's bathroom. This time Amber Rains followed Mia into the restroom. But this room was far larger and had multiple stalls and sinks. It was completely empty, which seemed to suit the Seeker just fine. Mia appeared to choose one of the stalls at random and entered.

"Do not take long," again warned Amber Rains.

Mia did not answer. It was nearly time. She would have a tiny window of escape and she needed to be ready. She sat down on the toilet but made no effort to do anything else. The stalls partitions went most of the way to floor and Amber Rains would only be able to see Mia's shoes. She waited and listened. Then, rather suddenly, there was a growing noise in the hallway beyond. Many people walking and talking. The shift change at the hospital was right on time. Souls were always so punctual.

The door to the restroom opened and by Mia's guess at least half dozen women walked in. All them pleasantly talking to each other. It was a gamble, but if she right, Amber Rains would be momentarily distracted by the newcomers. Quickly ducking down, Mia rolled under the partition. The space between the panel and the floor was small, but for someone of Mia's size it was easy. She rolled through into the next empty stall and stood up. Time was short. Gradually opening the door, she peeked out. The Seeker's head was turned towards two women washing their hands, her attention not on the bathroom stalls. Looking through the narrow crack a portlier older woman passed by and blocked Mia's view of Amber Rains. Now was the time.

Opening the stall's door Mia walked out, the other Soul still blocking Amber Rains' view. Mia was fighting with herself to keep from running, a nervous energy bouncing around in her stomach. But running would draw attention far too quickly. Heading for the door to the outside, she expected any moment to have Seeker Amber Rains grab her by the arm and drag her back to her prison of horrible Soul TV.
The door to the outside opened and more Souls strolled in. Mia gulped down a nervous shudder and passed through the incoming group. She was small and quick enough that she maneuvered through them in four quick strides. Her hurried walk caught the Souls off guard, being a rather rude interruption by their standards. But Mia did not care, she was through the door and into the hallway.

She continued walking, the jumpy energy in her little body made it feel like was about to explode. How long did she have, thirty seconds? Maybe a full minute? Down the hallway Mia was ever so slowly approaching a green door leading to the hospital's stairwell. There was a sound of a commotion coming from the bathroom and Mia quickened her pace.

Ten steps…Five…Then three…and Mia opened the door to the stairs and began to run. Taking two steps at a time she nearly bounced up the stairs. Running free at last.

Mia knew her freedom would be short lived. The hospital had plenty of security cameras and more enough Seekers to execute a complete search of the grounds rapidly. For now Mia was not going to worry, she had her minor victory and she was going to enjoy it. Today the Seekers would get to live up to their name, they would have to find her first.

Three floors up, she exited the stairs and choose a hallway at random. Here the hospital was not nearly as busy and there were few Souls around. It seemed most were busy with cleaning, no Healers or Seekers in sight. Plenty possibilities for hiding or…other mischief.

"Stupid bright eyes," sneered Mia with supreme confidence as she came to a turn in the hallway. Shooting a look back at the stairway, she continued her private rant as she rounded the corner, "Never paying attention…"

Thud.

Mia stumbled back, momentarily disoriented from running right into someone. The person she had run into was also straightening herself out. She was taller than Mia and at first glance she looked older. A Healer or one of their assistants, thought Mia. But on closer examination the would-be woman was really just a girl. A youthful face with a splattering of freckles on her nose. Rusty red hair tied in a long braided ponytail. Her body was younger than Wanda's, maybe even Mia's age.

"I'm so sorry," said the girl in a calm and even voice. "I hadn't expected anyone to come running around the corner…" She trailed off as she too was studying Mia. Her eyes, ones with rings of silver, widen in astonishment.

"You're a…"

"Human," finished Mia with a silent moan. Well so much for her little adventure. This Soul would go running off, crying for the Seekers.

"Wow," breathed the girl. She looked down at herself and then back to Mia. "You're one of the ones from two days ago when the Seekers came." Her voice took on a breathy excited tenor. "Everybody at school has been talking about you."

Mia started in surprise. She was so confident this Soul would panic and run off, or at the least be very frightened of her. Not act like she was famous or something. Her curiosity peaked, Mia asked, "What are they saying?"

"Well…umm…" stammered the Soul girl as she gave the impression she was not prepared to have Mia ask her a question. "See, most of my friends' think it's a good thing. That the Seekers won't
have to keep hunting all over the city. Nobody will get hurt anymore."

She trialed off again, an unhappy little frown forming on the corners of her lips. "Some others though think it's all a big trick. That you're going to hurt us…maybe make that horrible disease come back."

Mia bristled. "We cured the disease, why would we want to bring it back? Our own people died too."

The girl took a step back, a little frightened by Mia's harsh words but then firmly nodded. "That's what I thought," she said. "My guardian, Dawn Runner, got really sick. But your Healer's medicine helped save her." She eyed Mia carefully and more than a little caustiously. She appeared to reach a decision and then rendered her judgment. "I think if you don't want to hurt us and you behave yourselves, then why shouldn't you get to stay."

Hands on her hips, Mia scoffed. "Really?"

"Really," confirmed the girl. She glanced back and forth in the hallway and then grew curious. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm out for a walk," lied Mia. She considered it was probably best to not linger on her actual reason for being on this floor. Twisting the question around, Mia asked, "What are you doing here? You're not Healer."

The Soul girl smiled faintly. "No, but I'm thinking about becoming a Healer when I'm fully grown. After everything with the sickness, I started coming by after school to help. Mostly I just help clean, but sometimes I run and get supplies for a Healer." She paused and then slowly extended her hand. "By the way, I'm Red Leaves Caught in the Wind."

Mia stared dumbly at Red Leaves' raised hand. It took her a moment to understand the Soul wanted to shake her hand. Feeling very odd and suddenly a little shy, Mia gently took the offered hand. "I'm Mia." She ignored the itch in her hand when she touched Red Leaves

"I'm glad to meet you, Mia," said Red Leaves agreeably.

There was a long silence and Mia shifted restlessly. She really was not sure what to do. Other than Wanda and to a lesser extent Long Rivers, she actually had never interacted with Souls for any length of time. In Wanda's case, the Soul was still nervous to be near her after their first unhappy encounter. And while Long Rivers was always polite, he was clinical and detached when examining Mia. Red Leaves also seemed uncertain what to do next, she remained standing still with a slightly confused little smile.

Mia remembered something Sister Mary-Margret told her once a long time ago. In polite company when meeting new people, if you did not know what to say, try asking the other person about themselves. At the time, the nun's suggestion made little sense to Mia, what did polite company mean? Why would you want to know? But in the absence of any other ideas, Mia found herself asking Red Leaves.

Brightening at the question, Red Leaves began to talk about her life. She had come to Earth with her best friend Summer Sky from Flower world. They had both been inserted into the bodies of sisters at their school by the Seekers. Summer Sky was inserted into the youngest sister while Red Leaves was inserted into the elder. With Dawn Runner, a Soul from the planet of the bats, they were a happy little family with their new lives.
Red Leaves stopped her account as Mia's face crinkled sadly. "I'm sorry. I-I guess you wouldn't want to hear about that…"

Mia felt herself shudder. Red Leaves was right, she did not wish to hear about the Souls' insertion. But Mia also had an odd Déjà vu feeling about schools and Seekers. It was an unpleasant feeling and she shuddered again.

"Let's talk about something else," suggested Mia wearily. "So, you go to school, clean up after Healers, what else do you do?"

"Well," considered Red Leaves, "I also run track after school."

"Oh," said Mia as her eyes lit up hearing the Soul's hobby. "A runner! Mia is good at running."

Picking up on Mia's interest, Red Leaves nodded excitedly "I like the sport as well. I've participated in several track meets with other schools."

"Do you win?" asked Mia.

Red Leaves frowned. "We don't play to win. No one keeps time. Everyone participates and gets a chance to cross the finish line. The track meets are about physical recreation exercise. It's good for the body."

"That's dumb," announced Mia pointedly. "What's the point if you don't know who wins? It's more fun when you don't how the game will end."

Shaking her head, Red Leaves long braid bobbed back and forth. "It doesn't sound very fun if you lose. People's feelings would be hurt."

"Gahh," groaned Mia. Not in anger but in frustration at the Soul's silly objection. Then an idea struck Mia and she smiled like the cat who just caught the canary. She looked down the nearly empty hospital hallway and then back to Red Leaves. "How do you know how it feels? Shouldn't you try a real race before passing judgment?"

Red Leaves face scrunched up as she considered Mia's argument. "Well, maybe. But, Mia, where am I going to have a real race?"

Mia's grin was from ear to ear. "Glad you asked!"

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"Ian, I did it."

Ian O'Shea did not reply. His eyes were closed and his body was still. Except for the soft swirl of the ventilator machine next to his bed, the room was silent. The lights in the room were turned down low. Wanda had done this in the hopes of finding some rest if she was near him. But sleep had eluded her and all she could do was sit with Ian and wait.

She watched the slow rise and fall of his chest. At this point in his healing, he was breathing mostly on his own and the ventilator helped his new lungs with purified air. Long Rivers had explained regenerated lung tissue was much more complicated than skin and muscle. That you could not just apply a gob of HEAL medicine to charred lung tissue and expect to get up and move about in a few minutes. Taking his hand in her own, Wanda reassured herself that Ian was alive and doing well.
His hand warm and alive. But also limp. His body put into a deep sleep while it recovered.

"I've heard it said that Humans in comas can still hear the world around them," said Wanda as she gave his big hand a little squeeze. "I don't know if it's the same with our drugs. Maybe you can hear me? I'd like to think you can."

In the dim light, Ian's face was peaceful as he slept. There was just enough illumination to show the slight discoloring of the left side of his face. The brand new skin stood out in contrast to his normal pale skin tone. Pink like a newborn. The flesh was far better than any skin grafts human medical science could provide. But still, burns that seared down to the bone were no mere matter for even Soul medicine.

Wanda felt her throat constricting and cleared it with an effort. "So as I was saying, I stopped the Seekers. They've agreed to allow you and the others in Chicago clemency. I don't know about back home" She sighed wearily. "I guess it just one thing at a time."

"Everything is contingent on helping the Seekers finding the humans behind the plague and the attacks." Wanda ran her thumb across Ian's hand, a soft, soothing motion that Ian had always found calming when he was stressed. "I know you think the humans of the 'Facility' are evil. Maybe they are…maybe they're just frightened. I don't know."

The Seekers had provided her with pictures from the hotel. The burnt out ruin of the kitchen and dining room. Their insistence the attack had been carried out with great emphasis on preserving life. That any inflicted damage was caused by the Humans themselves as they resisted. If they would have only cooperated no one would have been hurt.

"Why can't they understand?" said Wanda bleakly. Mel had jumped down an elevator shaft to escape the Seekers. Dell had fought and wrestled with them until they shot him three times in the chest. And Ian…And Ian had blown up the gas line in the kitchen in a last-ditch effort to stop the Seekers from chasing after Wanda and the others. Did the Seekers not understand that the Humans would always resist. That some could not be broken.

A few tears worked their way down Wanda's cheeks. She did not try to wipe them away. "Marc and Scott are talking with Seeker Sage of Tides, attempting to put together what they know about the Facility and what the Seekers know. I can tell it really bothers Marc that Sage is in Bright Moon's host. But he tries so hard to be brave."

A slight smile grew on Wanda's face despite the tears. "Ian, do you remember way back when I asked you why you didn't want to kill me? How you said it wasn't right to execute a private for a general's war crimes? Would you want to kill Sage of Tides? Sage is as close to a general as we Souls have. Chief organizer for the invasion of Earth." A bitter laugh escaped Wanda. "The irony is Sage was the one who agreed to my peace terms. Because of Sage, you are alive."

No response came from Ian. The Healers promised everything was going well. Long Rivers himself had inspected the work done on Ian's body. He would be in the SLEEP induced coma for two more days just to make sure his body was correctly healed.

"Now I know how you felt when I tried to have Doc kill me," said Wanda as more tears came. "I thought my sacrifice would be better for everyone. I was so stupid." A trickle of anger blossomed in her chest. "And what you did was stupid too. Trying to blow yourself up to save me…no more of that…no more of us trying to die for each other."

Wanda's breathing started coming in uneven pants as she pushed herself out of her chair and she found herself shouting. "Do you hear me, Ian O'Shea!? I said no more!"
Drained she fell back into her seat. Shifting her head she could see out the open door to the hospital beyond her outburst had caught the attention of the nearby Seekers and a few Healers. Wanda did not really care if they stared or not. Drying her eyes with her free hand she sat alone with Ian for a few more minutes. Sage of Tides and Jade would be excepting her soon and she needed be calm and collected.

Taking Ian's hand from her own, she placed it back on the bed. Rising she leaned over his unmoving body. She laid a gentle kiss on his lips and said, "Wake up soon my love, I need you now more than ever."

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The stairwell door burst open with a bang. Cast open with enough force the green metal door smacked into the rubber stopper mounted on the adjacent wall with a loud thump and then bounced back. As the door rattled in its frame, a blur of a small body with dark hair leaped out from the stairs beyond the doorway. Sliding to a stop on the freshly polished floor the figure revealed herself to be a triumphant Mia.

Close on the heels of the Asian girl came another body rushing through the doorway. A taller girl with rusty red-brown hair tied in a long braid which flopped around as she came to stop next to Mia. Throughout the hall and the neighboring rooms, Healers and the patients all started in alarm at the loud disturbance of the two girls' entry and then Mia's whoop of victory.

"I win!" exalted Mia to the scarlet shaded face of Red Leaves Caught in the Wind.

"You…Cheated," panted Red Leaves as the girl tried to get her body's breathing under control. Bending over she put her hands on her knees and sucked in air.

Mia snorted indignantly. "I did not. I won fair and square."

The other girl straightened up as she caught her breath and pointed back to the now closed stairway door. "You were on the flight of stairs above me when you jumped off, caught yourself on the railing below, and then vaulted over and past me."

"So?" replied Mia with a fierce grin.

Red Leaves expression turned incredulous. Her freckled nose scrunched and her eyes narrowed. It was an attempt to look very mature and adult on a face that was still too young. "First, we said we would see who was faster at running. You took a shortcut, that's cheating," admonished the taller girl. Red Leaves face then softened with worry. "And second, that was…dangerous. Mia, you could have hurt yourself."

"Pfft," came another snort from Mia as she dismissed Red Leaves' concern. "Not if you know what you're doing. It's easy." Tipping her head to one side she considered the Soul's initial argument. She bopped back and forth on her heels for a few seconds and the waggled her finger in front of her new friend.

"Now I remember saying we would see who could reach the 3rd floor first," argued Mia. "I never said we had to run all the way. Whatever means to reach our goal was fair."

"B-But," stammered Red Leaves as tried to reason with Mia. "You said how quick you could run. Our debate was on who could go faster. So it was oblivious we were talking about a test of natural racing ability." She again waved at the stairway beyond. "…Not our skill at recklessly jumping
Mia countered with her official trump to any argument she was losing, "Nuh-uh."

Shaking her head with a frown, Red Leaves said, "That's not how you discuss a disagreement."

"Say's you," chuckled Mia.

"You…You are very stubborn," scolded the Soul to Mia, who continued to stand her ground with her lopsided smile. Red Leaves then noticed they had gained the attention of nearly everyone on the floor. Glancing around the surrounding area, she saw from the adjoining rooms in the hallway and a nearby Nursing station more than a few of her people were watching them with a combination of concern and confusion.

With her face flooding with embarrassment, Red Leaves bowed her head and spoke with gentle, conciliatory words. "Umm, I'm sorry for bothering everyone. Please…"

Mia broke in loudly, "It's not Red Leaves fault. She was just trying to teach me how to behave." She smiled and waved at all the observing Souls. "You know, Wild Human with all our crazy antics."

Red Leaves face color darkened with further mortification. "Mia," she whispered, "don't make this worse by lying."

"Not lying…at least technically not lying," countered Mia.

Looking about, Mia could see her presence was only further bothering the Souls. A woman in light blue scrubs at the nurse's station regarded them warily but seemed uncertain how to respond. The Humans' status in the hospital was still a little unclear. Sensing it was time to move on before the woman or someone else called for the Seekers, Mia grabbed Red Leaves Caught in the Wind's hand and began pulling the bigger girl along.

"Com'on Red," said Mia as she ignored the itching sensation where her hand touched the Soul.

"Where are we going?" question Red Leaves.

Mia shrugged. "You tell me. You said you had tasks to do in the hospital and I will help."

"Well," said Red Leaves as she thought about her assigned duties. "I do need to clean all the waste bins and fill the soap dispensers in the bathrooms on this floor."

"Great! Sounds incredibly tedious. Let's do it!" roused Mia with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

Red Leaves pulled Mia to a stop. It took the girl more effort than she would have thought to stop the smaller Human. Mia was quite strong and seemed filled with an almost unlimited amount of energy. "Mia," she began a little awkwardly, "why are you helping me?"

Mia gave her usual non-comital shrug. "Don't have anything else to do. Feels better to do something than nothing." Then feeling a growing sense of her own unease she looked down at the floor and shifted her feet restlessly. "I like talking to you Red…you're nice to me. All the others look at me like I'm some type of weird animal they found."

"Oh," said Red Leaves and drifted off, unsure of what else to say to her odd new friend.
Mia brightened and pushed out of her momentary funk. "Besides, not many people can out run me. You are fast."

"Then you admit I did win the race," replied Red Leaves with an expression that could almost be called smug.

"I thought you said winning wasn't important," reminded Mia. "Everyone should enjoy 'physical recreation exercise.'"

"But…I mean…That's not what…” spluttered Red Leaves and then she stopped. Fixing Mia with a very shrewd look as she played back her earlier discussion with the Human. "Did you cheat on purpose to prove your point about winning?"

"Maybe I just don't like losing," offered Mia as she found herself unable to meet Red Leaves gaze.

More head shaking came from the taller girl causing her ponytail to bob around her head. "Mia, you are manipulative and deceptive. It's not right to cheat and lie, it only ends up hurting people."

It was Mia's turn to be perceptive as she watched the Soul scold her. Red Leaves was trying hard to act like a grown up. She mostly succeeded, but Mia noticed an edge of a smile trying to work its way onto the girl's face. "Admitted it, you're having fun."

A minor battle began to play out on Red Leaves' features. Between a stern adult pose of responsibility and an eagerness of adolescent entertainment. The slightly bashful smile began to win out on the Soul's face. "Okay, yeah, I'm having a good time," confessed Red Leaves to Mia. "But no more lying," she warned, "and we need to begin my…our chores."

"You got it," said Mia eagerly as they started to move again down the hallway, eager to get to work. As she picked up speed, Mia shot Red Leaves a goofy grin over her shoulder. "For the great good of all, let's go clean some bathrooms."

Red Leaves Caught in the Wind rolled her eyes but quickly followed after Mia. Working together it did not take long for the two to work through cleaning three different bathrooms. Mia found the work little different from the chores she has given from her adoptive family. She had usually dragged her feet when doing them, finding the tasks boring and dull. It was not lost on her how desperate she had become for something to do that she now actually wanted to clean. But working with the teenage Soul, Mia realized she was actually enjoying doing the chores. She made a game out of how fast she could do the work and Red Leaves readily joined the impromptu race.

"I'm going much faster than I usually do," said Red Leaves as she emptied a trash bin into a large black garbage bag Mia held open for her.

"Mia is always helpful," intoned Mia as she closed and tied the bag.

Red Leaves cocked her head to one side. It caused her long braid to swish about on her shoulder. "Why do you sometimes do that?"

"Do what?" asked Mia.

"Speak like that, speak in the third person," explained Red Leaves.

"I just do sometimes," replied Mia as she looked down at her feet. "I-I don't even realize I'm doing it."

"Maybe you should see a Healer," suggested Red Leaves helpfully.
Mia slouched against the bathroom wall and with a tired sigh she responded to the Soul's quizzical look. "I've seen Healers...Brother Simon, Sister Annie, and bearded Long Rivers. Lots of poking and prodding. Not fun."

"They don't know what's wrong?"

"It's..." began Mia but trailed off, uncertain how to speak to about her mysterious and disturbing past. How did she explain to Red Leaves that if she closed her eyes and spun in a circle she would know exactly where the Soul was standing without peeking? Or about where she had come from? It would make the Soul run away from her in terror, no matter how much Red Leaves claimed to not be afraid of her.

"Can we talk about it later?" pleaded Mia.

"Umm, okay, if you want," said Red Leaves hesitantly.

Easily sensing Mia's gloom and willing to accommodate her friend, Red Leaves looked about the stalls and sinks of the bathroom and declared the room clean. Both girls worked to drag the filled trash bag out of the door and haul down the hall. They passed through double-sided swinging doors as they made their way to the floor's trash chute. Going only a short way into the new hallway, Mia drew to a stop when she caught sight of someone she recognized. Someone she had not seen since the Seeker's attack at the hotel.

"Nigel?" questioned Mia as she saw the young Seeker look up from where he was sitting on a padded bench.

Night Ember Lights blinked in surprise at seeing Mia and then nodded slowly to himself. "Mia, I'm relieved to see you are alright." He looked at Mia, then to Red Leaves, and then to the trash bag both girls were carrying. Perplexed he asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm helping Red Leaves here clean," replied Mia while pointing to the other girl.

"Umm...Hi," greeted Red Leaves with an uncertain smile as she took Nigel's dark dress uniform of a Seeker. Turning to Mia in surprise she said, "I didn't know you were friends with a Seeker."

"Oh, this is Nigel. He's okay, I guess, for a Seeker," answered Mia. A sad little frown worked its way on to Nigel's lips at hearing her description. "But, Nigel," asked Mia, "what are you doing here?"

"You don't know?" said Nigel, but he was already shaking his head before Mia could answer. "No, how could you?" he muttered more to himself than anyone else. Abruptly standing up, he pointed to a side corridor. "Down that hall the Healers are looking over Dell."

Mia suddenly bounced with excitement. "Brother Dell? He's here?"

But before Mia could take off, Nigel took hold of her arm. A firm grip that kept her in place. She plaintively winced, not really in pain, but at the burning itching sensation that shot up her arm at his touch. Nigel noticed Mia's discomfort and immediately let go of the girl's arm.

"Sorry, Mia," said Nigel apologetically. "But Dell was badly hurt when the Seekers...attacked." He looked like he was very close to crying. "There was much damage to his body. Now the Healers are checking on how well the medications worked."

Mia felt a sickening sensation grow in her stomach. Swallowing nervously she twisted towards the adjacent hallway, but her feet felt like they were bolted to the floor. Mia brought herself to ask, "Is
"Dell going to be alright?"

"I don't know," answered Nigel weakly. "The Healers haven't said much to me. They are focused on cleaning out the damaged tissue."

For a long time Mia stood frozen in spot, staring dully at the shiny white floor of the hallway. Brother Marc had told her everything was going to be alright. Why had he not told her about Dell? On some level she knew Marc was only trying to protector her, but the betrayal stung hard enough to bring tears. Finally, Mia forced on her legs to start moving. All but forgetting about Nigel and Red Leaves, Mia entered the side hallway, her feet moving like they were lead weights. In the corridor, Mia quickly spotted two men dressed in perfectly pressed black uniforms standing guard in front of a doorway.

At seeing the two Seekers, Mia felt her misery turn to a surge of anger. She rushed forward, only to have the two uniform men step in front of her, blocking her way. "Let me through," she cried, but the two stern-faced Seekers remained standing impassively before her. They were impossibly big, with wide shoulders and impressively large muscles in their forearms. Mia found herself very much wishing she had a knife or any type of blade so she could cut the monstrous aliens down.

Continuing to glare up the Seekers, Mia heard Nigel behind her plead with the men to let her in to see Dell. Mia twisted about, hoping to catch a glimpse of the room beyond. All she could make out was an unmoving figure laying on a mattress while a small group of men and women in white coats surrounded the bed in a semi-circle. The group was silent and there was a continual rhythm of machines beeping out Dell's vitals. Nigel's request to allow her entry was briskly rebuffed by the Seekers, they were under orders to allow only Healers into the room. Shifting again to peer past the guards, Mia caught sight of Red Leaves standing at the start of the hallway, her hand still clutching the garbage bag. Her face had gone pale and eyes wide as she stared at Mia and the growing commotion in front of Dell's hospital room.

"There you are," said a new but all too familiar voice.

Mia then heard the steady clip-clop sound coming from Seeker Amber Rains' shoes clicking on the hospital's polished floor. Every footstep bringing the woman closer seemed to shout her agitation at having to track down Mia. An angry groan managed it way out of Mia's throat as the annoyed Seeker stopped in front her and the two guards.

"This Human child doesn't belong here," informed Amber Rains to the other Seekers.

The two giants just nodded in agreement, they had instructions to restrict visitors and little interest in allowing Mia access. But Nigel rose to defend her. "Please Seeker," he implored Amber Rains, "Mia only wishes to visit her friend. There is no harm to allow her a brief visit."

Amber Rains studied Nigel critically, her body becoming peculiarly tensed when she recognized the young Seeker. "You are one those who betrayed us…forsook your calling to help these wild Humans," her words carried an equal part of incredulity and indignation.

At her comment, Nigel seemingly collapsed within himself. His whole body wilted in dejection. "I-I am," he admitted with his head bowed low.

"Leave him alone!" snapped Mia as she pushed herself between Nigel and Amber Rains. "At least Nigel was nice to us," she said while glaring at the Seeker, "unlike you assholes."

"I'm not here to debate you about your treatment," said Amber Rains coolly. "Or the mental states of certain individuals," she added as she continued to eye Nigel suspiciously. Switching to focus on
Mia. "You need to come with me. Seekers Sage of Tides and Jade have many questions for you."

It was all too much. Mia's anger reached a boiling point and abruptly and violently exploded. "NO!" she screamed as loud as her lungs would allow. Thrashing her hands about she railed, "Everyone keeps asking me what I remember! Everyone! And I don't know! I don't remember!"

All the Souls in the hallway were momentarily taken aback by Mia's unexpected outburst. The two Seeker guards exchanged brief glances and readied themselves for to restrain the girl if needed. Amber Rains shook her head in tired exasperation and muttered about getting some sedative SLEEP gas. "Please Mia," pleaded a pained Nigel as he tried to get the girl's ranting under some type of control.

But Mia's tirade only grew in strength. "I don't remember!" she chanted over and over. Tears began to run down her face. She squeezed her arms around herself and began to shake. "I don't remember…I don't remember….the needles….they hurt so much….

Sobbing now, Mia began to sway on her feet. Her trembling began to grow as tears streamed down her face. She clenched her eyes tight and moaned out, "I was so…cold…and it hurt…"

"Mia," whispered Nigel. The other three Seekers had gone very still as the stared dumbfoundedly at the shuddering human. Meekly he reached out and lightly touched Mia's trembling body. At Nigel's tentative touch, Mia's eyes shot open and everyone let out a collective gasp of astonishment.

Mia's dark eyes now contained a faint glimmer of silver. Weak but still visible from the overhead lights. Still shaking fearfully, her gaze swept over the gathered Souls with her new eyes, but she did not even registered their presences. In a high-pitched voice, simple and childlike she spoke as she looked around, "Where's Whisper Winds? Where's Mama?"

Clouded confusion formed on Amber Rains' face. "What's happening?"

Nigel swallowed with difficulty. Mia looked so scared and vulnerable. Her silver ringed eyes were filled with blind terror. Kneeling beside the quivering girl, he put his arms around her to bring her calm. "I don't know…I think she's beginning to remember."

At his explanation, Amber Rains pulled out her cell phone from her pants pocket. She began speaking into it in low tones when Mia started talking again. "Please," begged the girl in her new reedy voice. "I just want to go home. Please…"

Combining with her earlier screaming Mia's sobs were bringing attention from the Healers in Dell's room and other nearby hospital staff. A small but rapidly swelling crowd began to form around Mia and Nigel. Amazed whispers grew from the both the Seekers and the Healers. The girl seemed lost in some sort of waking nightmare. Very gently the Seeker shook Mia trembling form. "Mia, can you hear me?"

Mia did not react to Nigel's words and her eyes continued to dart about, unfocused and panicked. "There are men in masks…they look so angry…." She trembled intensely at these unseen phantoms of her memory.

"Please," beseeched Nigel to one of the Healers. A grey haired woman dressed as a nurse. "Get Healer Long Rivers, tell him Mia's memory is coming back." The woman nodded numbly and rushed to a nearby nursing station.

"They're Humans!" cried Mia suddenly as she started to jerk and struggled in Nigel's grasp.
"No, Mia…No, you are safe and with us," soothed Nigel as he desperately tried to calm the frightened girl.

"Ahhhh!" screamed Mia. Her hands went to her head and her face twisted in agony. Nigel was joined by Healers who eased her to the ground. There were quick and urgent requests for everyone to step back and give them room. On the ground Mia continued to wither and moan, her hands clawing and twisting at her sides as the seizure racked her small body.

"We need the SLEEP sedative, right now," commanded one of the Healers as they worked to control the girl's spasms.

"No," countered Amber Rains, her phone still at her ear. "This child has critical information about the Human insurgents. We need to interrogate her."

The Healer blanched and openly gaped at Amber Rains. "Seeker," he replied icily after a long pause, "this child is need of medical attention. She cannot be…interrogated." He said the last word like it was a curse.

The Seeker was about to argue when Mia let out another shrill scream and then went suddenly still.

"Mia!" cried Nigel as he held her limp form. The Healer pressed two fingertips against Mia's thin neck, checking for a pulse. After a moment, he nodded and said, "She is alive."

From behind them came sounds of people separating and more Healers arriving with a medical gurney. Nigel let out an exhausted breath he did not realize he was holding. "Thank you," he managed to wheeze out as the Healers raised Mia's unmoving form towards the stretcher. Lifting her with gentle care it took them no effort at, she was so small.

Nigel kept pace with gurney as the Healers started to push it down the hallway. Seeker Amber Rains also followed after, she was still speaking urgently into her phone. Surprisingly, Nigel saw Red Leaves Caught in the Wind also keeping up with the medical stretcher. He could see fresh tear tracks on the girl's pale face as she followed after them.

A faint moan came from the bed and Mia's eyelids began to flutter. Nigel noticed the previous faint silver rings were gone, just her normal human eyes remained. Her lips moved and a weak whisper came from Mia. Nigel had to lean in close to hear what she was saying, Amber Rains did as well. Mia's voice was like a rustle of dry leaves on hard pavement. She struggled with each word.

"He's here…been here…all this time…down in the white dome…down in the dark…and…and he hates us so much."

Chapter End Notes

Long time readers will remember Red Leaves Caught in the Wind from my first story. At the end, one guess about who Mia's talking about.

-Walker
Melanie stared at the payphones for a long moment. They were an odd paradox she considered absently. The whole bank of payphones looked nearly brand new, polished and clean. Of course, no one would pay, they were free for anyone to use. But few Souls would. Most carried cell phones, and any Soul would be happy to let you use theirs if you needed one. So why did the aliens bother keeping these older landline phones around? Like everything else they did, preserving their hosts' culture and infrastructure seemed to be of great importance to the Souls, even if what they were preserving had little value.

Leaning in and disrupting her private contemplation, Kyle whispered questioningly, "Mel?"

His sunglasses had slid down his crooked nose and his blue eyes showed their worry. And his worries were extensive. It contained concern for her, for their vulnerability on this busy street filled with Souls, for Jared's desperate mission to the caves, and their situation in general. But by a large margin most of his fear was for Sunny.

"I know, Kyle," she said, trying to sound soothing. "I just need to be in the right frame of mind to do this." Acting like a Soul was not usually hard for her. She had plenty of memories to draw upon. Be soft-spoken, gentle, and serene. However, not the easiest to do when she had her own ocean worth of worries.

Adjusting her own sunglasses so she could read the phone number scribbled down on a small pad paper Kyle held out for her. Picking up the shiny black receiver she began to dial the number. After pressing the last digit, she let out a troubled sigh. The steady drone of the dial tone was replaced with regular rhythm of ringing and on the fifth ring the phone was answered.

"Hello," said a pleasant male voice on the other end. "This is the Healing Center in Banning California. How may I direct your call?"

Melanie took one deep breath and let it quickly out. Then she began. "Hi there," she said warmly. "I'm looking for a friend of mine. I do so hope you can help me."

"Of course," said the friendly voice on the other end. From the sound of it Melanie guessed the man was on the older side. Maybe in his late sixties or early seventies. "What's your friend's name?"

"Sunlight Passing Through The Ice," announced Melanie. Carefully announcing each word of their missing friend's name.

A short pause followed. Melanie imagined the Soul was reviewing inpatient records. The man cleared his throat and said quietly, "One moment please." Then the soft tones of on-hold music began to play over the line.

Melanie waited patiently as the tune droned on. Kyle's forehead wrinkled as the time passed. "What's taking so long?" he muttered.

"I'm on hold," replied Melanie with a shrug.

Kyle's frown smoothed out and was replaced with an expectant hope in his eyes. "All those other Healer places said they didn't have Sunny right away. Maybe this is a good sign."

"Maybe," said Melanie cautiously. She did not want to get Kyle's hopes up. The man was too quick
to do run off and do something rash. After the better part of three days hunting for Sunny, their search had drawn them to the remote San Gorgonio Memorial Hospital. An odd place for Sunny to be taken for her apparent case of sunstroke. But then every instinct Melanie had told her something very strange was going on with the Healers in the city.

Opening his mouth to say something more, Kyle broke off as Melanie put up a hand. On the phone, the music had vanished. A long silence followed and Melanie was just beginning to think the line had been disconnected when a woman's voice came on.

"Hello," said the pleasant and inviting speaker. "I am so sorry to keep you waiting. My name is Healer Azure Waves. Whom might I be speaking to?"

A See Weed then thought Melanie at hearing the Healer's name. Best use one of the Bat names instead. No point getting into some long drawn out discussion about the Azure Waves' previous planet. "Hello Healer," replied Melanie cheerfully. "I'm Word Keeper."

Melanie could practically hear the Soul's smile on the other end of the phone. "Well Word Keeper, I understand you're looking for a friend of yours. A...Sunlight Passing Through The Ice? Is that right?"

"Yes," intoned Melanie. Best to keep this exchange short and simple. "She suffered a case of sunstroke. She was taken away to a healing center, but we've not been able to find out which one."

"Well, we don't have anyone here by that name...But I would so like to help you out. Why don't you tell me where you're at? We can come and help you find your friend." The Healer's voice was as sweet as honey.

Even in the balmy California sun the cold twist in Melanie's stomach made her shiver. She and Kyle had already risked much to enter two other healing sites in search for Sunny the day before. The last thing she wanted was to drive around LA with a bunch of Soul Healers. Making her voice as calm as possible she answered the Azure Wave's proposal. "I do apologize, but I can't. I'm waiting for my partner's return."

"Oh, don't worry," came the Healer's response. "We'd be more than happy to wait for him and then we can all go looking for your friend."

This Healer wasn't giving up easily, considered Melanie dryly. She dearly wished that Souls would just occasionally not be so damn helpful. She needed a way to extract herself from this conversation before she roused suspicion in this Healer. An idea struck her and she quickly put it to use. "How about when my partner returns, we come to see you? Then we can all coordinate our search."

A pause on the other end of the phone. A long pause. "Yes," came the reply finally from Azure Waves. "Word Keeper, why don't you tell me where you're staying and a way to get in touch with you. I'll do some more checking on my end and call you if I find anything."

"Sure," replied Melanie. She had been through this before with other Healers. Just a fake phone number and address. Far too risky to give out their actual location at the small hotel Kyle and she was staying.

"Just you and your partner?" asked the Healer after Melanie had given her the false information. "How long have you been in the city?"

'Damn was this Soul nosy,' thought Melanie. On the phone, in the background, there came the
sound of voices rapidly talking, but the sound was too faint and washed out for her to make it out clearly. It almost sounded like someone arguing. Strange. Before she had a chance to respond to Azure Waves the Healer broke in.

"Word Keeper," she said happily, "I believe we've found your friend."

"Y-You have?" stuttered Melanie in surprise.

"Yes," came the reply. The Healer's voice had become quick and urgent. "Are you at the address you gave me? We can have someone there shortly to bring you to your Sunlight."

Something was wrong. The Soul's voice was a little too demanding, too insistent.

"Umm," began Melanie, her mouth going suddenly dry.

The voice on the phone turned firm and commanding. "Where are you?"

Melanie surprised herself just how fast she slammed down the receiver. She did it hard enough to make the whole row of phones rattle. Her hand clenched and unclenched right above the receiver as she tried to calm herself down. Kyle started in shock and then abruptly looked around, checking to make sure her aggressive behavior was not drawing unwanted attention.

"Mel," he hissed, "what are you doing?"

Shaking her head firmly, Melanie pushed her sunglasses back up her nose. She had been wearing the contacts too much the last few days and they had left her eyes feeling gritty and dry. Her sunglasses cut off the too bright glare of the setting sun, filtering the intense golden-red tint of the sky to a manageable level. Making a more casual glance up and down the street, Melanie assured herself that no one was watching them.

Kyle was still staring at her expectantly. "Not here," she softly informed him. "Back to the hotel."

He pursed his lips into a thin line but did not argue.

It was a short walk back to their hotel, one of the many near the Santa Monica Boulevard. Both Kyle and Melanie would have preferred a more out of the way place to stay, away from so many Souls. But the area was full of tourists, a constant coming and going of people. Much easier to go unnoticed in a crowd of always changing travelers. Neither one spoke to each other, instead just making their way unhurriedly with the rest of Souls strolling down the wide sidewalks of old Route 66.

At the crosswalk before their hotel, Melanie once again covertly scanned the area. Looking for anything standing out. She told herself she was looking for anything that might show signs they were being followed or the hotel was under surveillance. But truthfully, she was really looking for Jared's Jeep in the hotel's parking lot. A wild hope he might have returned while she and Kyle were out. But as she searched the area, there was no sign of Jared or his Jeep.

"I'm sure he'll be back soon," said Kyle earnestly.

"Am I really that transparent?" asked Melanie with a troubled look. The crossing sign lit up and the two rebel humans began to cross the street.

A crooked smile flashed on Kyle's face as they walked along. "Not so much, I was looking for Jared as well."

Melanie kept the churning anxiety in her stomach at bay until they managed to reach their hotel.
Once safely inside and the door to the outside locked, she collapsed into a nearby chair. Drawing her knees against her chest, she let out an uneasy groan. It passed through her body with a little shudder. Jared should have been back from Arizona yesterday. She knew there were any number of legitimate reasons he would be delayed. But calm sensibility was not winning out as her restless fears mounted.

"Mel, no worries. Jared is smart and knows how to take care of himself," comforted Kyle in a soft voice.

Looking up she saw Kyle was sitting on the nearest bed, his sunglasses off, and his blue eyes beseechingly sympathetic and sad. There was a time she would have never guessed the bombastic Kyle O'Shea was capable of any emotion other than energetic hostility. Caring for Sunny must have been the catalyst for change in Kyle, mused Melanie. She wondered if the old Kyle would come back if Sunny was indeed gone.

"Thanks," and she managed a modest smile.

Kyle's wide shoulders shrugged. "I should be thanking you. You could have gone with Jared back to the caves to warn everyone. You didn't need to stay and help me find Sunny."

Melanie's weak smile grew to a lopsided grin. "You would have gotten yourself caught the first time you went to a healing center looking for her."

"I survived just fine before Ian and I found your Uncle's underground fun land. Jared is not the only one who can take of himself," grumbled Kyle as his face hardened and a little bit of old Kyle slipped back in. "Now," he said as he rose from the bed and swung his arms out in an expansive gesture of frustration, "why don't you tell me why you freaked out back there."

Rising as well, Melanie crossed to a small desk on the other side of the room. She managed it in just four steps. Between the two beds, chair, a dresser doubling as a TV stand, and the tiny desk, there wasn't much space to their little hideout. The only item on the narrow table was her notebook. Picking it up, she flipped through a few pages. Hastily written notes of names of Soul healing centers and Healers she had dealt with for the past two days.

Turning back to Kyle, who was still standing and waiting expectantly, she began to recite her phone conversation with the healer at the Banning healing center. When she was done, she dropped back in the chair and let out a tired sigh. Kyle still was standing, his arms crossed, and his face contorted into a confused glare.

"You think this Healer Azure Waves was lying about Sunny being there?" he asked after a few moments of silence.

"Her whole tone was off," explained Melanie. "Not like a Healer's. I think she was lying, I'm just not sure if she was lying about Sunny."

"A Seeker then," replied Kyle. His voice going completely flat and devoid of any emotion.

Almost imperceptibly Melanie nodded, reluctantly not wanting to confirm Kyle's worst fears. That Sunny had been found out by the Seekers at the Farmer's Market and taken away for integration. Or more likely, Sunny being removed and a Seeker placed into her body and was quickly learning all the Soul's secrets. Looking over her notes and trying to make sense of them for what felt like the hundredth time, Melanie felt her own confusion and doubts begin to pull on her.

"Possibly," she said. "I don't know. Something odd is going on with the Healers in this city. The
last two days we've been given nothing but the runaround trying to find Sunny. And we're not the only ones…"

Melanie broke off midsentence as an all too familiar sound of an engine came from the hotel's parking lot. The shifting of gears as the vehicle slowed and then stopped. The steady purr of the motor cut out and a moment later came the creak of a jeep's door opening. A little squeak Melanie would know anywhere. Jared's jeep.

Her notebook was cast to the side and her lingering questions about their search forgotten. She was out of the chair and to the door in a blink of an eye. The wait seemed to be unbearable. Too many eternities passed but then finally the door opened to revile his golden tan skin and his light-flecked eyes.

Going to him, Melanie wrapped her arms around him and sunk her head into his chest. "Oh, Jared," she murmured, her relief palpable at his return. But his returning embrace was half-hearted and she could feel the tension in his body.

Pulling back, she saw the taut anxious lines of worry on his face. Kyle also sensed Jared's mood and his own face grew dark. An icy dread began to pull on Melanie. Did Jared's warning to the Uncle Jeb and the others about Sunny's disappearance come too late? Had the Seekers already pieced everything together and captured or killed everyone at the caves?

But Jared's grim answer only served to topple that fear and replace it with another. One that was even worse.

"It's Chicago," he said. "They've been taken."

Jodi sat staring out the hospital window. The sun was setting in the west, casting the whole sky into a beautiful warm glow. It reminded her of a pleasant summer day she had spent with Kyle before they had started their last year in college. A lazy, carefree day, spending their time at a picnic and walking the trails running along the Columbia River. Before the Souls had come.

She did not turn from the window when she heard the familiar steps of Samantha Greer's approach. A senseless hope filled Jodi that the other woman would not disturb her. Right now Jodi really wanted to be alone. But no such luck as Samantha purposefully cleared her throat to get Jodi's attention.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Jodi. But we need to talk."

"Nothing else has come back, Sam," replied Jodi without looking away from the window. "Just Kyle O'Shea. My college boyfriend. The parasite Sunlight Passing Through The Ice has no direct memories of him." With a resigned sigh she added, "He's most likely dead."

"It's not about that," came Samantha's answer and Jodi now turned, surprised by the level of worry in the other woman's voice.

"What's wrong?"

Sitting down next her, Samantha eyed her very carefully. Apparently trying to decide how to respond to Jodi's question. "I just had a very…" and she stopped while she searched for the right
word. "Let's say, odd conversation with a parasite called Word Keeper. Did Sunlight know anyone by that name?"

"I don't think so," she replied after a moment of consideration.

Samantha tipped her head side to side. Her tone turned admonishing. "Think closely, Jodi. It's important."

Jodi furled her brow and concentrated on the memories of Sunlight Passing Through The Ice. It was a strange sensation to Jodi. It was like looking at a thousand photographs on the walls of an empty house. After an exhaustive search, she shook her head.

"No," she said. "I'm sure."

"Well, most likely she was lying about her name," muttered Samantha. With a displeased sigh, she answered Jodi's questioning look. "Someone called looking for you, or more precisely, for Sunlight Passing Through The Ice."

"What? Really? But if they were lying about their name…" Jodi trailed off, realizing what that meant.

"She was a Seeker," confirmed Samantha.

An edge of fear began in Jodi. For the last few days, she had felt unconditionally confident. No worries or concerns. But so far their little rebellion had worked in the shadows, silent and stealthy. A confrontation with the parasites was slowly but steadily building. And things were going to get much worse before they got better. She swallowed and asked a little nervously, "If the Seekers know? What do we do?"

"It's alright. We've been preparing for this. We can handle it," comforted Samantha with a little smile. But Jodi noticed the worry in Samantha's eyes did not diminish.

"I wish I could remember where I was for the last few months," said Jodi agitatedly. "I bet it's important." As her frustration built up, she ran a hand along the back of her neck. "Are we sure this thing is really asleep? Not in some way affecting me? I mean, it's still attached to my brain."

Samantha looked away, not meeting Jodi's irritated glare. "Every test we've run on you shows the parasite inactive and dormant."

Jodi continued to press on. "And my memory problems haven't happened to anyone else? Maybe mine's different in some way. Something that doesn't show up on the tests."

With her gaze falling to her lap, Samantha sighed. "It's not like I'm an expert on recovering a human mind, even with what I know from Healer Azure Waves. I don't think there are any experts. It's safe to say we're deep in unexplored territory."

"Then why don't we just take the parasite out of me?" asked Jodi. "Just to be sure. Can't we stick it into one of those cryotank things?" She liked the idea of being free of the alien worm and the possibility of getting all her memories back. Continuing to stare at her hands, Samantha still did not meeting Jodi's eyes. "Sunlight wasn't a Seeker or Healer. It doesn't know anything that can help us. So what's the big deal if I don't lug it around?"

A small slow nod came from Samantha. She finally looked up and the surprised Jodi when she leaned in and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "Alright, there is another reason we're keeping the parasites in the people we wake up. Yes, it's important to learn everything we can from them. But
it's not absolutely critical."

Confused, Jodi pondered what other reason someone would want to leave these creatures inside people. "Why?" she asked after coming up with nothing.

"If you, right now, were to get caught by the Seekers. What do you think would happen?"

More contemplation, but with some distinctly disturbing thoughts about what the dark uniformed Souls would do to her. "Well," said Jodi finally, "Once they saw little Sunlight was still in me, they would want to find out what was going on. I guess, send me to their Healers."

"Who would take poor little Sunlight Passing Through The Ice out and put what in?" prompted Samantha coolly.

"A Seeker," whispered Jodi. She had not even considered such a possibility. Being recaptured. Turned back into a puppet and erased once again.

Samantha shifted herself closer to Jodi "Granted, if we got you back, we could pull it out. Bring you back. But while that little bastard was running your body, the Seekers would learn everything." Then with a smug grin she added, "Unless you were immune to the new Soul being shoved into your neck."

Jodi could not help but blurt out, "What!?"

The coy smile on Samantha's face widened. "Think of the inserted parasite sort of like getting the flu," she explained. "When you get the flu, your body's immune system creates antibodies so you can fight off the virus. Then those antibodies prevent you from getting infected by the same virus."

Stunned, Jodi asked after a moment, "You mean I'm immune from insertions?"

"Not quite yet," came Samantha's reply. With a dip of her head, she went on. "Wish it was, but it's not as easy as getting a flu shot. The CURE medicine in your body needs time to adapt- while the parasite is still attached to you. Takes about a week."

"Wow!" said Jodi with rising amazement. Giddy with excitement a laugh escaped her, but then she stopped. "Samantha, why all the secrecy on the immunity? Sounds like something we should be celebrating."

Making a little V with two raised fingers on her right hand, Samantha explained. "Two reasons. One, this is a huge game changer. Stopping the parasites from being able to use our bodies and minds against us, takes away one of their biggest advantages. But until we develop our immunity we're vulnerable to reinsertion. Best to keep the information under tight control so no Seeker learns about it."

Folding one finger down, Samantha went on. Yet her triumphant smile faded and her expression became a distant stony mask. "The immunity…the changes the CURE produces…it's genetic." Seeing the confused look on Jodi's face she elaborated. "Changes to your DNA, new prion proteins produced while existing structures in the brain are…altered." She paused for a time, seemingly gathering her thoughts. "With everything people are going through, waking up after being a host for years. The sheer trauma of finding out the whole world has been taken over. The decision was made to let people have one less thing to worry about."

Out the window, the sun was nearly down. The earlier rosy ruddiness fading to dark blues and purples. After taking her own time to consider everything Samantha revealed, Jodi asked, "Are these changes safe?"
Rising from her seat, Samantha rolled her shoulders, working a kink from her neck. "Jodi, I'm going to need you to be close and on hand if our mystery Seeker decides to drop in with some friends. We can keep you protected, but we may use you as bait to draw them in."

"Umm…okay," said Jodi unsure how feel about what was being asked of her.

Samantha began to walk away until Jodi jumped and forcefully raised her unanswered question again. "Sam, really, this immunity is safe, right?"

"Sorry, Jodi," came Samantha's words apologetically. "I've got a million things to do. I didn't mean to push off your question. The answer is - it is. Smith's people had years of research and studying the parasites to build the CURE. They made sure it wouldn't create any damage." Giving Jodi a mild smile, she again started walking away.

"Well…Alright. Thanks for telling me," replied Jodi, staring at the back of the retreating woman. Unable to shake the feeling Samantha had just lied to her.

###

"Has there been anything? Even from one of the other Souls in Chicago?" asked Melanie, trying to keep an ember of hope alive. She sat with Jared on one of the beds, his arm around her. He was holding her close, his strong arm proving her support as she lay against him.

Jared made a small little motion of his head. Just a tiny little movement signaling the negative. "I'm sorry Mel. Right now were considering everyone in Chicago lost."

On the other bed, facing them, Kyle scowled. "How the hell did this happen? I thought they had two Seekers working for them. Giving'em a heads up when the rest of bastards went hunting."

"I don't know," replied Jared resignedly. "Jeb, Nate, and a guy up in Chicago, I think his name was Eric, worked out the signaling strategy. Both Nate and Jeb picked up a single distress call from Chicago four days ago and ever since then…silence."

Melanie shifted in Jared's embrace and asked, "So what's the plan now?"

Jared's face became decisively neutral as was his response. "We took precautions, none of the Marc Walter's people knew our exact location. But Ian and Wanda do."

Kyle snorted loudly. "Ian would never let himself be taken." But Melanie could see the added lines of worry on his face at his brother's fate.

"We can't be sure of that," said Jared evenly. "And we can't take the chance. Jeb's was already working with Nate for a general evacuation from the caves when I got back to tell them about Sunny."

"And your news combined with what was already going on must have gone over great," glowered Kyle sarcastically.

"Yeah," agreed Jared. "Pretty much the straw that broke the camel's back." He glanced down to Melanie. "You should have heard Maggie going at it. Saying how we should have never trusted any of the Souls. That Jeb's led us all to ruin. Blah…Blah…Blah."

Grimacing at the thought of Aunt Maggie raking Jeb over the coals, Melanie let out an annoyed
groan. "Swell, because yelling at Jeb over something he has no control is so very useful."

"No need telling me," replied Jared as he rubbed his brow. He shifted and gave Melanie an apologetic smile. "Sorry, Mel, but I need to stand up and stretch a little. Been driving most of the day to get back here."

Reluctantly, Melanie let go of Jared. He stood up and stretched his arms out until his back gave a soft little pop. Rolling his head around she could see his shoulders begin to relax a little. At least some of the stress from the last few days was being worked out of his body.

"I had this hope," said Jared morosely, "That when I got back, Sunny would be here and we'd have one less thing to worry about." Looking around their miniscule hotel room he added, "I'm guessing you guys didn't have any luck?"

Kyle and Melanie exchanged glances and Melanie moved to retrieve her previously forgotten notepad. Flipping through the pages she began to tell Jared of her and Kyle's quest for Sunny. All three of them had seen Sunny being loaded into an ambulance with two other Seekers at the Farmer's Market. The incident had caused a considerable crowd to gather and the three humans had wisely stayed back from the gathered Souls. They had gleaned from overheard conversations that Sunny and the two Seekers were suffering from sunstroke and were being transferred to a local healing center. That explanation had made little sense to them. And the mystery was only further compounded when Melanie ventured to the nearby healing center. The ambulance, Seekers, and Sunny had never arrived.

"When you left," said Melanie to Jared, "we went to the next three nearest healing centers. Not one of them had any record of the ambulance or Sunny. Then we started making calls to other sites. They were not much help either. At one place, their computers were down. At another, the Soul usually tasked with tracking ambulance was out and her replacement didn't know the procedure well enough to help."

"Then we went to Cedars-Sinai," continued Kyle. "Pretty much the center of operations for all the Healers in the area."

"Wait...Wait," interrupted Jared as he gawked in astonishment at Kyle and Melanie. "You both went into one of the largest hospitals around. Basically HQ central for all the Healers?"

Melanie gave Jared a soft smile, trying to reassure him. "Relax Jared. We were smart and careful. I did most of the talking and we kept our interactions with the Healers short and simple. They never suspected anything out of the ordinary about us."

"Still," said Jared with a shake of his head, "you took a big risk. What did you learn?"

Kyle nodded. "That Sunny isn't the only one to go missing after encounters with Healers."

Puzzlement spread across Jared's face. "What do you mean? Are they being kidnaped or something?"

"Missing isn't quite the right word," said Melanie with a wave of her hand. "Some of them are having unexpected health problems and are staying longer at a healing center. Some of them decided to donate their time to a healing facility that's understaffed. Others are taking impromptu vacations after their most recent check from a healer. But yes, a few, like Sunny, did appear to just vanish."

Jared's confusion did not lessen, in fact, it only grew. "Umm...okay Mel, mind explaining? Are
Souls missing or not?"

"Oh, on the surface of things it all sounds fine," clarified Melanie. "All nice and normal, but as we
looked closer a lot of it didn't add up. People weren't at the healing centers they were supposed to
be. And there were more than a few computer errors and mistakes in the paperwork."

"And the other Souls aren't seeing this?" asked Jared.

"Oh, they are," replied Kyle. "But you know how Souls are. They trust and believe each other
completely. So if a healer reports there's been a mix-up with the computer records, of course, the
others believe it."

Melanie shook her head. "It's not that they're stupid, Jared. It's just they don't look for a lie. They
aren't suspicious of each other. But I'm a human and I am. And I think the Healers, at least some of
them, are lying to the other Souls."

Jared was silent and still for many seconds. Deep in thought. "Seekers are the only Souls who
regularly lie, Mel. Are you saying the Seekers are behind this?"

"Jared, I wish I knew. Before you got back, we just finished speaking with one of these so-called
'Healers'. I know she was lying...so I guess that makes her a Seeker...But why? Why would the
Seekers abduct their own people?" Melanie drifted off, her eyes going distant as she not only
puzzled over the cities Healers but also fresh fears for their friends in Chicago. "Jared, what are we
going to do?"

A long resigned sigh came from Jared as he sat back down with Melanie on the bed. Putting his
arm around Melanie he drew her close. Speaking to his lover he said softly, "We have to head back.
We'll get some sleep and head out early." To Kyle, his tone turned regretful. "I'm sorry Kyle, but
we have to assume Sunny is gone."

###

"You're Kyle."

*In the dream, Kyle's eyes were like blue sapphires. Bright in wonder and astonishment. "Yeah, who
are you?" he asked.*

*In a whisper, "Sunlight Passing Through The Ice."

'No! Wrong! I'm Jodi!' But the words would not come out of her mouth. She was frozen...

Jodi came awake with a violent start, nearly pushing herself off the narrow cot where she had been
sleeping. Her forehead was damp with sweat while her breaths came in ragged gasps. A strong
shudder went through her body. Then running a hand through her wavy hair, she worked to get her
unruly curls into some sort of order. Something to relax her as the last remnants of the nightmare
faded away.

Looking around Jodi saw several other sleeping figures on nearby cots. Their chests continued
moving in slow easy movements of unconsciousness. At least her fitful dream had not woken
anyone else. A shaft of light from the hallway beyond gave just enough light to see the simple
round clock mounted on the far wall. A quick glance told her it was past one AM. Twisting her
pillow she laid back down and gazed up at the dark ceiling of their makeshift sleeping quarters.
The dream had seemed so real. So vivid. It felt like she could have reached out and touched Kyle and Jodi found herself longing for him. She missed him so much. Could it have been something more than a dream? Another fragment of memory she had recovered? Experimentally Jodi poked at the gray area in her mind. The memories still stubbornly would not come forth.

After a few more minutes, she gave up trying to go back to sleep. Her mind felt like it was racing at a hundred miles an hour. Softly slipping from her cot, Jodi padded her away to the room's door. She opened it as quietly as she could, but it still made a noisy thump when it closed behind her. Hoping she had not disturbed anyone sleeping, Jodi walked down the hospital corridor. Her throat felt dry and chalky and she still felt a little shaky from her nightmare. She needed to find something to drink.

Even at this late hour the hospital was busy. By now the number of reclaimed humans numbered well over hundred. Ever since the failed ambush Williams and his ex-Seekers were in a state of frantic work to capture and reclaim the remaining Seekers in the Los Angeles area. Meanwhile, another group was busy assembling some equipment Smith had brought with him. There seemed an almost endless amount of work to be done. Jodi felt a little guilty she had been trying to get any sleep.

In search of something cold to drink Jodi made her way to the cafeteria. A small group of men and women were gathered around one the square tables in the far corner of the room. A large sheet paper covered most of the table top, complex design schematics were written on both sides of the document. They were intensely focused on their work, speaking about engine modifications and power distribution and Jodi did not want to bother them. Instead, a small plastic bottle behind the glass door of a refrigerator caught her eye. A single bottle of orange juice sat next to other bottles of soda and water. Pulling it out, Jodi quickly had the cap off. Taking a large swig of pulpy OJ she felt better almost immediately.

"What are you doing up?" came a voice from behind her.

Startled, Jodi nearly dropped her juice. Turning around she saw the sleepy face of Samantha sitting at a nearby table. She had sunk so low in her chair that Jodi had not seen her when she entered the room.

"I just needed something to drink," replied Jodi as she held up her half empty bottle.

Getting a good look at her friend, Jodi saw the weariness in Samantha's body. She seemed almost ready to slide out of the chair to the floor. "Are you okay?"

"Just a long day and an awful headache," replied Samantha groggily and to empathize her point she rubbed her forehead with thumb and forefinger.

"Is there some of that…what's it called? NO PAIN?" offered Jodi helpfully.

Samantha let out a yawn. "Yeah, was going to get some before I tried to get some sleep." Managing a small smile she added, "Best thing these bastards Souls brought with them - nice, safe, and effective pain medication."

Jodi returned Samantha's smile, but inwardly she felt the continued apprehension that Samantha and the others were holding back. Not telling her everything. Maybe they were just trying to protect her, but she could not shake the feeling there was more to this CURE then she had been told.

"Well," said Samantha as she let out a groan and forced her weary body out of the chair. "You should get back to bed. It's going to be a busy day tomorrow."
"Right," she agreed. While Samantha went in search for some NO PAIN, Jodi headed back to her narrow cot. Despite her recent and re-emerging fears, she was tired. Like everyone else she was working hard. Perhaps in the morning after a good night rest her fears would once again be gone. Maybe she would remember more of her hidden past.

She was just passing the woman's restroom, the same one she had her earlier breakdown when she heard the faint, but recognizable sound, of someone crying. Stopping, Jodi pressed her ear up against the door. Again a soft keening whimper reached her ears. Somebody was softly weeping in the bathroom. Most certainly a woman from the sound of things.

It must be a recently reclaimed human, mused Jodi. Sobbing over their stolen life, missing their family, the sheer desperation of their situation, or all of the above. There were any number of things to be despondent over. Pushing the door to restroom open, Jodi stuck her head. "Hello?" she called gingerly, hoping to not further upset the depressed woman.

No response. Sighing, Jodi enter the bathroom in search of the sobbing. But it took her no time at all to realize the small room was completely empty. No one was lurking in the stalls and there was no other place to hide. Except for the faint buzz of the overhead lights, the restroom was completely silent.

Almost ready to leave, Jodi once again heard the choked sob. It came from right behind her. Spinning around, Jodi's eyes swept the room, frantically looking for the source of the mournful noise. But there was no one there.

Beginning to feel more than a little panicked, Jodi twisted back around again. Now facing the broad mirror above the sinks, she could see the entire room behind. It still was completely empty. Another little sob reached her ears.

"Who's here?" demanded Jodi to the empty air.

The response came like a teeny voice coming from far away in a dark mineshaft. 'You...can...hear...me?'

Jodi's eyes continued to scan the room with its only visible occupant. "Where are you?"

'Here.' The voice was faint but undeniably present.

"What the hell are you playing at?" snapped Jodi, no longer feeling in the mood to speak to a would-be ghost. "I don't see anyone. Who are you?"

'Sunlight...Sunlight Passing Through The Ice.'

Every muscle, every nerve ending, every sensation Jodi had ground to a complete halt. The thing in the back of her neck was talking to her.

It was impossible. She had been repeated assured. It was dormant. It was sleeping. It could not wake up again. Her body was desperately trying to remember how to correctly breathe. Jodi gasped out, "You..."

'You're Jodi...aren't you? I...can't believe...I found you,' came the voice. It was soft and gentle and most bizarrely the parasite's voice sounded happy to be talking to her. Like a reunion of long lost friends. But there was no real sound, no spoken voice. Jodi was not hearing with her ears. All of it, from the first little sob to Sunlight's identifying Jodi was all taking place in her head.

'You!' It was the only coherent thought Jodi could manage.
But Sunlight Passing Through The Ice had much more to say. 'I haven't been able to see or hear much of anything. I couldn't even move. Not since that man sprayed me and those two Seekers with the black gas. Are the Seekers okay? Where am I anyway?' The voice was getting stronger, closer.

Jodi's hands were locked on the edge of the sink. It was the only thing keeping her upright. In the mirror, her face was pale white and rapidly growing sweaty. Her dark eyes were frantic. A pounding fear struck Jodi, harder than any physical blow. The parasite was going to take her body. It was going to turn her into a puppet again. Her eyes would shine with silver

Somehow sensing her panic, Sunlight asked innocuously, 'Jodi? What's wrong?'

And fear turned to rage.

'What's wrong!? You want to know what's wrong!?' screamed Jodi in her mind to the alien parasite. 'I'll tell you what's wrong. You took my life. Everything I had, you stole. You took my family. You took my home. For six years, you and every other one of your miserable kind lived inside us. Turning us into some type of hollowed out puppets.'

'But Jodi…' whimpered Sunlight. It was shrinking away from the fury burning in Jodi's mind.

'I hate you!' thundered Jodi. Her anger was feeding on itself, growing into a storm. 'You're supposed to be asleep! You're supposed to be nothing! You're supposed to never hurt me again!'

'Please,' begged the parasite, 'I'm scared. I don't know what's going on.'

Then something akin to an invisible touch brushed along her arm. Instruction sent by the wretched creature in her neck to move her limb. But it was muted and ineffectual and Jodi's hand did not move an inch. By whatever fluke that let parasite talk to her, it could not command her body. A vindictive smile spread on Jodi's face. She would not let this vile thing win. It would not take control of her again. It would not!

'You can't run my body like a doll. Not any more,' sneered Jodi coldly as she could feel the thing's confusion at not being able to order her body about.

Renewed crying echoed in Jodi's mind. 'I'm sorry…I'm sorry,' came the parasite's weak response as its weeping apology grew increasingly incoherent.

Jodi had been holding the sink so hard her hands had gone bone white. Releasing her grip, she half lowered, half slumped, to the floor of the bathroom. Her whole body ached like she had just run a marathon. She took a few shuddering breaths as she tried to calm down. It was not easy as her mental landscape now was a chaotic mess of two minds in one body. Sunlight's continued blubbering was an annoying buzz spinning through her skull.

'Shut up!' demanded Jodi of the sobbing Soul, 'I can't think with all your crying.'

But it continued on, making mournful keening noises. Until it said one word, a name, which once again stopped Jodi cold. 'Kyle!'

'What did you say?'

Giving the mental equivalent of a sniffle the parasite then replied, 'Kyle was with me in the market. Where is he? He'll be so worried about me.'

Kyle. Jodi could see him hazily in Sunlight's memories. He looked almost exactly like how she remembered him. A little bit older, his nose even more crooked. Strange, he stood next to her
infested body at the farmer's market wearing sunglass and a stiff little smile.

Jodi focused her entire being on her one time usurper. She could feel Sunlight try to flee, but there was nowhere for it to go. Seething, she drilled into it. 'What did you do to him!?'

'I didn't hurt him,' pleaded the parasite. 'He protects me…'

Pressing in, Jodi could make out more recovered images. A cave with growing crops? Other people…other humans? A girl, or was she a woman? With long blonde hair with silver ringed eyes. The memories were from the gray blankness in her mind. Sunlight held on to these thoughts so tightly that even now Jodi could only dimly sense them. 'You're the reason I couldn't remember anything from the last few months. You're going to tell me everything!'

The parasite wavered, still very terrified of Jodi. But eventually it answered. 'Okay,' quivered Sunlight in her mind. 'It all started when Kyle came for me, or actually, for you…'
"I think they already know how to remove you."

Marc spoke as he leaned against the office window. Looking out the city was cast in an oppressive dark gray sky, storm clouds threatening another drenching upon the city. The glass was still streaked with raindrops from the previous shower. Turning back Marc surveyed the room. There were in one of the hospital's conference rooms. Like other places the Souls controlled the meeting area was clean to the point of being sterile. Everything neat and orderly. Other than the large wall monitor the only other furniture was the oval conference table and chairs around it. On the side nearest him sat Scott and Wanda while on the other side sat two of the most influential Seekers on the planet.

Letting his gaze settle on the two Souls on the other end of the table, Marc considered each one. The first was Seeker Jade in the Hollows. A lithe little blonde woman, Marc doubted her host body was older than eighteen. Her childlike face had the same sugary sweet smile on as when he had met her yesterday. And it was seriously beginning to grate on his nerves. Everything she said or did towards Marc or Scott carried an air of condescension. Her insults were always wrapped in a polite smile or seemingly harmless word, but she subtly made it clear she thought the two humans were dirt beneath her feet. It made Marc actually miss Seeker Skyward. At least he was direct with his disdain and did not hide behind a mask of insincerity.

"Marc, why do you believe the Humans of the Facility know this?" asked Seeker Sage of Tides. "Did they claim to possess the information?"

Refocusing on the taller blonde sitting next to Jade, Marc once again had to clamp down on the ever present feelings of guilt and worry for Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. Sage had continued to use her host body for these meetings. He suspected Sage was more than shrewd enough to realize using her body put Marc at a disadvantage. But at the same time Sage had been conciliatory towards the Chicago band of Human rebels. She had agreed, at least temporarily, to suspend any insertions of Seekers upon Marc's little clan. And now she listened with great interest as Scott and Marc recounted the Facility's attack on the Soul's Administrative building two months ago.

Pushing off from the window, Marc began to pace back and forth along the empty side of the conference room. "No," he said after a few moment of gathering his thoughts. "It's what they didn't say or do."

"Must you continually bop around?" complained Jade as she watched Marc move from side to side. "Can you not sit still while you talk?"

"Nope, this helps me think faster," replied Marc as he continued to pace around the room. He let his own disdain grow in his voice as he added, "I wouldn't want to waste your time, Seeker Jade."

"Oh, thank you, Marc," said Jade with a sickly sweet smile that could corrode steel. "I'm pleased you think this meeting isn't a complete waste of time."

Marc felt his fists tightened just a bit at her insult and his stride slightly falter. Jade's smile notched just a hair wider as she saw his reaction. "Anyway," said Marc tightly as he stopped his pacing and faced Sage of Tides, who had sat coolly impassive while Marc and Jade had traded their little
insults. "The reason I say the Facility already knows how to remove a Soul is because they didn't ask."

Jade open her mouth, likely to deliver a further slight when Sage laid a hand gently on the smaller woman's shoulder. "Jade, I would like to hear Marc's reasoning. Please hold your questions or comments till he is done."

Jade's smile dropped several sizes, but it still radiated the same smug attitude towards Marc. "Of course, Sage," she answered agreeably.

"See," began Marc as he resumed his walking, "I figured we had the ultimate get out of jail card when it came to knowing how to remove a Soul. It was your big deep dark secret. You'd do just about anything to keep it under wraps."

"Yes," replied Sage through an unhappy frown. "I can assure you we were not pleased when we learned of your plans."

"But," said Marc as he spun around and faced Bright Moon's host body, "You Seekers did cooperate. You would not risk us blabbing to any other Humans."

"It was an interesting strategy you employed against us," admitted Sage. "But how does this demonstrate these Humans of the 'Facility' know our secret."

"Like I said," replied Marc, "They didn't ask. They didn't bother to get the information from me or from the others. Don't you think how to to remove a Soul from a host body is just as important to a Human resistant group to learn as it is for you Seekers to keep a secret? Wouldn't humans do just about anything to learn how?"

Giving everyone a moment to consider his argument, Marc sat back down in his chair before continuing with Sage. "When you and I were brought..." and Marc cut himself off with a sigh. He had done it again, confused the woman in front of him as being his Bright Moon. After a pause, he began again. "I mean when Bright Moon and I were brought to see Adams, I figured that was what we wanted to know. What he'd demand from me. But he never asked. To me, that means they already know how."

"True," said Sage of Tides. A distant look grew in her blue and silver ringed eyes as she parsed through Bright Moon host's memories. Shaking her head slowly, she added, "Combined with everything they have achieved, it makes them a most dire threat to us."

All the Souls in the room exchanged troubled looks at Sage's pronouncement. None of them was happy about the possibility of how to remove a Soul becoming common knowledge among the Humans. Marc had been told by Ian about how their doctor had made many disastrous tries at removing Souls from a Human body. Only after Wanda had gained strict promises from them about preserving the removed Souls, had she reluctantly revealed how to safely perform a removal. The prospect the much more militant members of the Facility also knew how and would have little interest in preserving their kind left all the Souls deeply disconcerted.

Scott cleared his throat, in an attempt to restart the conversation. "Maybe," he mused, "they learned how after they leaped frogged ahead with Adams. If he actually retains all knowledge a Soul has when it is inserted into him."

Marc nodded thoughtfully, picking up Scott's line of thinking. "Yeah, I mean, they would have had to test him out first. You know, a trial run to make sure his immunity was working. They could have learned all types of stuff that way."
"As I have said before," said Sage, her tone becoming icy. "We are not discussing Adams supposed immunity. I want to know your dealings with members of the Facility. How you discovered them and what you know of their location."

Together Marc and Scott let out coinciding sighs. Both Humans were clearly irritated by the Seekers' control of the meeting. Scott spoke up first, "Look, we're straight with you. We're telling you what we know. We didn't know this Facility – whatever the hell that means," and waved his hands in around in emphasis of the groups' mysterious name. – "existed till they attacked us."

"And how are we supposed to discuss what we know?" shot in Marc as Scott went quiet, "When we bring up Adams and what he could do, you shut us down."

Sage did not answer. Her mouth went into a thin line of displeasure at the Humans' objections. But Jade, with her saccharine smile, replied smoothly. "Do you think we are stupid? We know you want to understand how to render your kind invulnerable to insertion. The man named Kane Adams was examined..."

"You mean dissected," interrupted Marc hotly.

Jade's sugary smile finally failed her. Her face became one of impatience, she was nearly ready to scowl. "He was examined," she reinforced, "and the details of his supposed immunity is not a topic we are going to discuss." Eying Marc squarely she added, "I'm surprised you show any concern for Adams. You beat him nearly to death."

Finally growing tired of tip-toeing around the topic, Marc leaned forward in his chair. Ignoring Jade's weak attempted distraction about Adams, he pointed an accusing finger at the Seekers. "The fact you two won't talk about Adams every time he's brought up in any detail," he sneered. "Tells me he really was immune to Soul insertion and you guys are freaking out."

A long, uncomfortable silence followed as both Seekers and Humans glared at each other across the table. It was finally broken when Wanda spoke up. "Please," she implored with her gentle tenor. "Both sides are frustrated. I know there is a lack of trust. But we all want the same thing, to stop any further violence."

Jade's rising frown vanished and her syrupy smile returned. "Ever the diplomat, aren't you Wanderer."

Wanda nodded with a small smile at Jade's apparent compliment. "I have learned to see both peoples' point of view. To try to reach a common ground."

"Hmm," replied Jade with a small nod of her head. "Finding common ground for our people is easy. You seem to have cultivated a skill," and she stared pointedly at Marc and Scott, "that serves little purpose."

"I suppose that would be a manner of opinion," opted Wanda tactfully with an added comforting smile of her own. However, further discussion of Wanda's diplomatic skills and Jade's judgment of them were interrupted when the door to the outside was opened and Annie was ushered in by two Seekers.

The young woman was escorted to a chair next to Marc by the Seekers. Yet Annie gave all the appearance of barely registering the two well-built Souls acting as her guard. She sat down numbly, her eyes distant, lost deep in thought.

At seeing her vacant expression, those on her side of the table grew immediately concerned.
Wanda feared Annie might be slipping back into her earlier exhausted depression. She had been working with Long Rivers as they cared for Mia after the girl had gone through something that could be best described as a seizure. Now Marc, Scott, and Wanda were all rapidly talking, asking if both she and Mia were alright.

Peppered with their questions, Annie blinked and refocused on those around the table. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I just was...distracted."

Watching all the commotion Annie had instilled in the Humans and Wanda, Sage of Tides cocked her head to the side and asked, "Annie Jansky, where is Healer Long Rivers?"

"He's still with Mia," softly replied Annie.

"I would speak with him," announced Sage. "I would very much like to know more about this girl Mia."

Annie's eyes had gone distant again. She shook her head slowly, trying to force herself to refocus on Sage's request. "Riv...Well he needed a moment," explained Annie disjointedly. "He's rather bothered..."

"Is Mia alright?" reiterated Marc as he stopped Annie's explanation. He placed his hand on Annie's and gave it a small squeeze. "Annie, I know you're under a lot of pressure. And I know it's not easy for you being back in this hospital."

Finally, Annie pushed away her dazed appearance with enough effort to refocus all her attention on Marc and the others. "No...No, it's not that. I'm fine. It's Mia."

Marc felt his heart jump into his throat. His voice thick, he asked, "What happened to her?"

With a distracted nod of her head, Annie answered. "I can tell you what, but not how or why." Seeing the fear still prevalent on Marc's face she patted his arm in comfort. "Don't worry Marc. She's stable and resting right now."

"Do you mean," questioned Scott, "you and Long Rivers figured out what's wrong with Mia?"

"We ran a whole slew of tests on her," replied Annie. "Like I said, I know what was done. Not really a clue how. And as for why? I can only assume who did this to her was insane."

"This girl, this Mia Chang," said Jade slowly. "Multiple people reported seeing a faint silver glow in her eyes just prior to her going into convulsions." With her eyes narrowing on the Humans, she probed, "This has never occurred before?"

"No, never," answered Marc with a shake of his head. Looking a bit bewildered, he turned back to Annie. "When we first found Mia and saw the scar on her neck, we checked to see if she had a Soul in her, we didn't find one. And I know when Long Rivers examined her, he confirmed she didn't."

"But she does," countered Annie.

"How?" asked everyone in the room.

"It's a matter of where," came Annie's enigmatical reply. Looking around the room she spotted the large display screen on the far wall. Standing up she offered a better explanation. "Let me show you some of the scans we took of Mia's brain. It's a lot easier to show you than for me to try to describe."
Working on the screen's elaborate remote control she began quickly parsing through files and photos. She handled the controls expertly and within a minute a picture was displayed on the screen. A human skull. It very closely matched what Marc assumed was an X-ray or an MRI image. But the image were far sharper and showed much more detail. The picture of the skull became rather ghastly as it seemed to almost float out from the monitor as it slowly spun on a vertical axis. It was surprising enough Marc and Scott leaned back in their seats. But they both quickly realized the 3D head was a trick of the light, created by the superior technology of the Souls.

"Is that a scan of Mia?" asked Wanda.

Annie shook her head. Working the controls, she made the 'bone' of the skull fade and the inner contents of the brain were shown in false-colored blue-grey. "No," explained Annie. "This is for Marc and Scott, they'll need to see this so they can understand the differences in Mia." Turning to the two men, her voice lowered and became resigned. "I'm giving you two a little overview of what generally happens when a person is turned into a Soul.

The rotating skull had almost completely faded away, it was only a faint outline leaving just the brain and the top part of the spine behind. With a touch of a button on her control pad, Annie stopped the image from spinning. Now the mass of neurons making up the human mind began to grow transparent, letting them see through the many sections of the brain. For about twenty second nothing else happened and Marc was about to ask what they were waiting for when he saw it.

Something new was appearing on the screen. It was a silver mass, a couple inches long, shaped vaguely like a ribbon. But this ribbon had long thin tassels attached to it that softly billowed out. Marc found himself pulled by a memory of when he was a child. His parents had taken him to Shed Aquarium. As a little boy, he had marveled at all the colorful fish. One of the strange creatures behind the glass had caught his attention. A partially transparent bulb with many tread-like appendages wafted about the center body. His father had told him it was jellyfish.

Marc had never seen an alive Soul up close and he was struck by the similarities between the two creatures. Most Humans called Souls worms, buggers, or sometimes centipedes. They were never called jellyfish. Maybe, Marc reflected, because anyone who ever got close enough to one of the aliens to make such a comparison inevitably ended being captured and controlled.

On screen, the Soul was slowly but steadily making its way along the upper part of the spinal column. Even as it moved, the many thin threads on the edge of the ribbon were pushing out. Reaching down the spine and then into the brain itself. There were hundreds of them. Each burrowing deeper, tying the little ribbon more and more into the human body.

"Umm, Annie," began Scott, his eyes never leaving the unfolding horror on the screen. "Is this a simulation or something?"

Annie's face became closed and distant. "Sorry, Scott, it's the real thing. When I was Crystal Spires, we ran some tests on new equipment. It had to be calibrated so an implantation of a Soul was done while the scanners were running." With a sad exhalation, she added, "It's a textbook insertion."

Glancing around the table, Marc saw none of the Souls, even Wanda, were bothered by what they were seeing. To them, it was normal, expected. Wanda caught sight of Marc watching her and saw the appalled expression on his face. Her eyes turned sad and downcast as she looked away.

"This is all well and good," came Jade's dispassionate voice. Marc tore his eyes away from the screen and turned to the small Seeker. "But I'm not interested in seeing what I'm already very
familiar with." Pointing at Annie she instructed, "You say Mia does possess one of us. I would understand how this is possible."

"Suit yourself," sighed Annie at Jade's order. She worked the controls again and on screen the image of the Soul taking over a human brain was replaced with a new three-dimensional head. Like before it rotated, but this time Annie spent no time peeling back the skull and displaying the contents inside. This time, the white skull disappeared at once and the blue-greyish cerebrum was already partly translucent.

This new image had to be Mia's and just as Marc expected, there was no silvery ribbon tied to her spine. Annie had said as much. But if Mia did have one of the aliens inside her neck, where else could it be? As the picture rotated in its false holographic display, he spotted it. In the upper right side of the wrinkled layers of the brain lay the same silver ribbon. It was folder back upon itself forming a slightly inverted v. The middle of the Soul's body was near the outer layer, where the unseen skull would be while the two ends went deep within Mia's brain.

Everyone, except for Annie, stared dumbfoundedly at the picture. Scott was the first to recover. "The para…the Soul is…inside Mia's…brain? Is that possible?" He was looking between Annie and the other Souls for confirmation of what he was seeing.

"Evidently it is," answered Annie coolly. "As this image clearly shows, Mia had a Soul inserted into the right frontal lobe and then partly into the temporal lobe. In her frontal lobe, at least, it appears there was a small section removed to allow space for the Soul's body."

"H-How?" asked Wanda shakily.

Annie made a small shrug. "Surgery, most likely. Mia has some small scars on her head. Her hair covers them well, you wouldn't even notice unless you went looking for them. They correspond to where the Soul is placed in her brain."

"Why?" asked Sage, her voice becoming uncharacteristically unsteady.

"As I said," said Annie as she sat back down in the chair. "I have no idea why someone would do this. I can tell you whoever did this was a genius. The ability involved with this…insertion could only have been done by someone with immense skill and some serious amount of technology. Brilliant, but also very crazy."

As the image continued to spin on screen, Wanda's eyes never left it. She suddenly let out a choked sob. "It's a baby."

"Yes," confirmed Annie softly. "High-res imaging shows the anterior structure of the Soul is still developing. That's how you can tell the age of a Soul," explained Annie to Marc and Scott.

"It's been mutilated," cried out Jade. She too was riveted by the display. Her voice going stringent with horror.

Marc studied the screen again. In its bizarre arrangement, it was hard to discern if the main ribbon body of the Soul was intact or not. But as he studied the image Marc realized what was missing from the silver body. It lacked the hundreds of fiber-like tentacles of other Souls. Only a few dozen spanned through Mia's brain. And all of them were short and stubby.

"It's more complicated than that," responded Annie with a tired sigh. "Those appendages haven't actually been cut off, well not like they've been ripped off or something. They were severed, I imagine through some sort of operation, and the ends grafted directly into her cerebral cortex."
Marc felt like his head had been struck and it was ringing like a bell. His words felt thick and clumsy in his throat. "I'm sorry…it attached itself to Mia's brain?"

"Attached is the wrong word. More like fused," clarified Annie. "There are some rather unusual structures in Mia's temporal lobe where those attachments are connected. It's not like anything I've ever seen. Either as myself or as Crystal Spires."

Sage of Tides lips trembled and she looked nearly ready to cry. Marc had never seen her act like this. It made the composed and an ever unemotional Seeker so much more like Bright Moon. A rising desire to comfort the Seeker began in Marc, but he quickly stomped it down. Sages of Tides was not Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. He needed to remember that.

"Can the Healers remove the infant from Mia?" she asked in a weak and wobbly voice.

"I don't know," answered Annie with a genuinely sympathetic smile to Sage and the Souls in the room. "This is beyond me. It's a damn miracle Mia is anything more than a vegetable after what was done to her." She held her hands out in a helpless gesture. "I have no idea how the two minds, one a Soul and one a Human are working in this setup. The integration is completely different from any normal insertion. She is a part of it, it a part of her."

"Anyway," continued Annie as she shifted her attention away from the monitor. "There'll have to be a lot more testing before…" and then her jaw closed with such force it made an audible snap. Her body went rigid as stared towards the now open door to the conference room.

Turning, the others saw Long Rivers standing in the doorway and at his side was Mia. The room went silent. No one moved. Mia's eyes were as wide as possible as she stared at the partial translucent image on the screen. The silence was ultimately broken as Annie began fumbling with the controls to the monitor, suddenly very clumsy as she sought to turn it off.

"I'm sorry," blanched the Healer as he swung his gaze from Mia to the people around the table. "She was most insistent on talking with everyone."

Mia shifted her eyes from the screen and looked up at Long Rivers. In a small voice, she asked, "That's me, isn't it?"

"Yes," came the distressed response from Long Rivers.

Annie's awkward attempts to get the display taken down finally met with success and the image of Mia's brain and it's companion Soul disappeared. Another long stretch of silence followed as both Human and Soul stared in a mix of wonder and shock at the girl who was far more than any normal child.

"I remember," said Mia in a near whisper. She touched her head gingerly as if she was afraid she might damage it. "Not everything…just more…than before."

"Mia," started Long Rivers, his voice hoarse. "As I said this is not a good idea. We still don't know much about your…condition. You should be resting."

"It's important," insisted Mia as looked around the table, ignoring the Healer's pleas. She chose the chair nearest Wanda. Sitting absolutely still, Wanda's eyes threatened tears as Mia sat down. Slowly surveying the people in room Mia's gaze settled on Marc. With a weak smile she said, "Told you I was a freak."

"Y-You're not." Marc's words stumbled out of his mouth as he went pale.
She made the barest shrug with her shoulders. "I am," said Mia simply. Seeing the expressions on everyone's faces, both Human and Soul, she added softly, "I remember who I was before. What I was...before."

Her voice had taken on a gentle, soft tenor, so unlike the Mia he knew, considered Marc. Some part of Mia, the Soul half he guessed, was now awake. "You sound different."

A very slight lopsided grin formed on Mia's lips. "Still me, I guess, just more. Now."

Sage of Tides cleared her throat, a district sound meant to draw everyone's attention, but it seemed to Marc the Seeker was also attempting to clear her mind. "Mia, I'm pleased to make acquaintance. I do wish to speak with you. I have many questions. But, I agree with Healer Long Rivers, you need rest. We can wait."

Mia brushed her hair back from her face and shifted to the Seeker. "You're not Bright Moon on Fallen Snow, who are you again?"

"I am Sage of Tides," replied the Seeker. "You see..."

"Listen to me, Sage," interrupted Mia, her gentle voice taking on an unexpected urgency. "It's like I was broken into a billion little pieces and then put back together. Some parts fit better than others. I...I don't know if it is all going to hold together. I might break apart again and lose part of myself. So I need to say this now."

Sage's eyes widened anxiously. Marc was pretty sure he was trembling as were others in the room. More now than ever the girl before them seemed to be something entirely different, something new. Drying her eyes with the back of her hands Wanda finally found her voice. "Mia, tell us then. Do so quickly so you can return Long Rivers' care."

"Of course, Sister Wanda," came Mia's response. She said it with just a hint of an impish smile as she settled back in her chair. Then closing her eyes, Mia started her story.

"I remember being Mia Chang. I remember living with my parents in Boulder, Colorado. Liang and Sasha Chang. And I went to school at Creekside Elementary." A soft sigh came from Mia. "I loved going to school, seeing all my friends, learning new things."

Mia shifted in the chair, but her eyes remained closed. "Then one day all the kids in the school lined up. Teacher said the nurse had to check us out. A routine physical she said. We all got in a long line and went into the nurse's office, one at a time. But it wasn't a physical examination. The Souls had taken over the bodies of the teachers and staff. And as each kid went in, a Soul came out."

"I remember Healer Graceful Wings pressing the bottle of SLEEP close to my face. She said I wouldn't feel a thing. And I didn't...I remember being Mia the Soul. I was new to this world, my first world. I took the name of my Host because I like it. Mia...Mia...Mia," chanted the girl.

"How old were you?" asked Scott.

"Seven."

Scott swore something under his breath, too low for anyone to hear the words even though the meaning was clear. "Just when the invasion really took off," contemplated Marc as he processed Mia's age. He made a guess at what happened next. "Your parents?"

"Yes," replied Mia. A pained expression rippled across her face. "I led the Seekers back to my
Mia's eyes opened to let a trickle of tears down her face. Shooting a very disgusted look at the two Seekers in the room, she added, "I was doing my duty as a Soul."

Both Sage and Jade said nothing at Mia's comment and she went on after wiping away a few stray tears. "Then they were Keeper of the Morning Song and Whisper Winds. And we were happy. I remember that. Everything was nice. I still went to school, played with my friends, and learned new things." Mia hesitated, pondering. "Strange how things completely change and yet remain the same."

"Yes, it is," said Jade plainly. There was a growing impatience in the Seeker's voice. "But how were you captured? What happened to you?"

"It came later," replied Mia. "We were going on vacation. To Yellowstone. I was so excited to go. I had read everything about the park. We drove there and on the way, when we were far out in the country, we came across a man on the side of the road. His car had broken down. Keeper of the Morning Song said we should help him. And we all agreed."

A strong shiver ran though Mia as she recalled the event. "We stopped and Keeper of the Morning Song got out of the car. There was nothing but woods all around us. Nothing other than us and the motorist, or so we thought. When Keeper walked over, smiling and asking if we could help, more men came out of the woods. They were dressed in camouflage, blended right in with the trees."

Mia clenched her eyes shut tight as if attempting to keep the memory away, but it did her no good. "They had guns and Keeper of the Morning Song tried to run…and they…they shot…daddy," and a heart-wrenching sob broke from Mia.

"Enough," trembled out Wanda, tears were freely running down the Soul's face as she listened to Mia's account. "Enough," she repeated. "You've said enough for now."

"No!" bawled Mia through her own tears. "I need to tell this…"

Gulping in several stuttering breaths Mia continued after letting herself regain a modest amount of control. "They captured Whisper Winds and me. They were many and they were very fast. Something was pushed into my face and I got so sleepy. Faded right away."

"I woke up and was tied down…There were other people…like me…all secured to beds." Mia paused and her face scrunched up, fighting to recall the memories. "It was like here, like a hospital. Many beds surrounded with medical equipment. People dressed like Healers or doctors."

"Surgical scrubs?" asked Annie.

"Yeah, also with face masks. I couldn't see their faces very well. But I knew they were human because they were angry…so angry. A couple Souls had chosen the final death…committed suicide and killed their hosts. It enraged the Humans when they killed themselves."

"I wanted to find Whisper Winds…But I couldn't move. I started crying…and couldn't stop. They told me to be quiet, but I couldn't help it. I was so scared."

"Do you know where you were at?" question Jade. She was standing now, her expression one of grim determination. "Mia, if you can give us a clue. Help us understand where you were taken!"

Mia ignored Jade completely and continued on, resolute. "One of the men in the masks came over to me. He held my hand and stroked my hair. He was…nice. He told me he was sorry they took me and he would take care of me. Not let anything hurt me."
"But one of the other men, I think he was in charge, told the nice one to leave me. I was to be sent somewhere else. They argued. The kind one said, 'We don't do this to children!' and the one in charge yelled back, 'It's not a child anymore!'"

A low moan came from Mia and she opened her eyes. Focusing on Jade she wearily answered the Seeker's question. "I think I was underground…not a cave or tunnels like our old home. Some of the walls were stone, solid rock, but like they were carved out."

"Perhaps a mine," speculated Jade.

"I don't know," replied Mia. "I don't remember much else…it's all a blur of pain and cold. I don't know how long I was there…Time seemed to be meaningless. I lost myself many times. Erased and remade. I…I think they were looking for something…something deep inside me and others. I don't know if they found it…" She drifted off, utterly exhausted and spent.

Marc swallowed painfully, it felt like he had been repeatedly punched in the gut. He did not need to glance around to know everyone else felt exactly the same way. Even in his most wild of ideas he would have never guessed Mia had been subjected to such horrors by the people of the Facility. He did not feel angry or afraid, only a dull ache. He was shell-shocked, he mused numbly. Unable to process the idea that anyone would conduct such grotesque and gruesome experiments on a child.

Long Rivers helped Mia out of the chair and guided her past the table. The Healer's arm held the girl, offering her support and compassion. Everybody was silent as they watched the two leave. When they were gone and the door closed, Scott summed up what everyone in the room was thinking.

"Who the hell are these people?"

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"I would like to speak to Marc Walters alone," said Sage of Tides as Marc was led back into the conference room. Marc's escorts, two brawny male Seekers, nodded curtly and promptly exited, leaving only Marc and Sage in the room. Sage was setting at the end of the table and she made a small movement of her hand indicating the chair to her left. Marc hesitated, but then slowly pulled out the chair and sat down.

"Did you have a decent dinner?" asked Sage as Marc eyed the blonde hair Seeker warily.

"Not really," replied Marc. Dinner with Wanda and Scott had been almost perfunctory. Marc had barely registered what he was eating. Their meal had gone without much in the way of conversation. Each lost with their own thoughts.

"After listening to Mia…just didn't really have much of an appetite," elaborated Marc.

Sage bobbed her head in agreement, "Believe me, I understand. I don't feel much like eating either." Gesturing to her body, she continued on, "I miss my old body…I had grown used to it little quirks and habits." She studied one of her hands critically for a moment before dropping it.

Against his better judgment, Marc found himself asking, "What happened to it?"

"It's safe and preserved for right now," answered Sage with a minor shrug of her shoulders.

"Are…Are you going to go back to it?" wondered Marc as he tried to figure out what Sage wanted
With a small self-conscious smile Sage replied, "I think I like being a male more than a female. Some of us like being one gender or another, keeping the same routine. On the other hand, I knew this one Bat couple who would switch genders as they went through their life terms, they liked the variety. I will admit this has been a…interesting experience, but I do plan on returning to my original host."

Uncertain if he wanted to continue down this line of conversation, of what would happen to Sage's current body and what would be Bright Moon's ultimate fate, Marc chose to change the subject. His topic of choice would not be any less pleasant, but it was something which had been building in Marc for the better part of the last day.

Keeping his voice deliberately calm, Marc said, "Wanda has told me, well…she explained to me your position within the Seekers. The role that you played in the invasion."

"I assumed she would," nodded Sage gently. She studied Marc critically, a cold and steady gaze. "Does this anger you?"

A laugh, which came out more like a growl, escaped Marc's throat. "That you were basically the one in charge? The one leading the whole invasion of Earth? Can't say it makes me very happy."

"My title was Orchestrator, not technically a leader as Humans would see it. I planned and coordinated with the Seekers and other first wave members. I ensured our intervention on this world went as smoothly as possible." she paused for a moment. "Or, at least, that's was how it was supposed to go."

Sage's steady stare did not drop from Marc but did grow unfocused as the Seeker recalled the past. "Here, perhaps more than any other world, we meet with the stiffest of resistance. Battles with your race grew much more violent and destructive."

She broke away from Marc and refocused her gaze on the buildings outside the window. It was evening now and the dark, oppressive rain clouds had finally moved on. The lights of the city shone brightly into the clearing skies. "I had to take on a much more active role. I had to plan strategies and military actions. I became a leader of the invasion. It was not a role I had ever planned on taking up. But if we were to emerge victorious, I had to. And we had to sacrifice much to achieve our goals."

Marc could not keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "So sorry we were such a pain in the ass. Maybe you should find another line of work."

"Maybe I should," came back Sage's reply and Marc could hear a trace of irritation in her voice. "Do not think I enjoyed any of it." Her voice then softened and her eyes lowered to the floor. "Nor will I enjoy any of what is to come."

Mulling over what Sage of Tides had said, Marc replied, "You're planning to take the fight to the people who make up the 'Facility'. Wipe them out."

"Yes."

Marc shook his head. "I've given you what I know, which I'll admit isn't much. But Mia's just unloaded more information on them than we had together. What more do you want from me?"

Looking back up from the floor, Sage of Tides fixed Marc with a truly penetrating stare. Her blue-silver eyes bore into him. "Help me stop them."
Bewildered astonishment crossed Marc's face and he had to work at keeping his jaw in place. "You've got to be kidding me," he said as he shifted his brain out of first gear. "What the hell do you need me for? You guys have the whole planet. Tons of Seekers, several billion Souls, spaceships, and who knows what else."

"And yet for all our resources," replied Sage, "we don't know where the 'Facility' is. We don't know what they are planning." An ever so small, sly smile appeared on Sage's face. "It has occurred to me the only ones to successfully counter these Humans so far is you and your people."

Marc was silent, still stunned by Sage's request. The leader of the Seekers leaned in, pressing her argument. "You were looking for them as well. What did you hope to accomplish if you found them first?"

Unable to keep Sage's intense scrutiny, Marc's eyes slid to the floor. "I-I don't know exactly. Maybe see if I could get them to calm down." Letting out a deep breath he forced himself to meet Sage's gaze. "Stop their attacks before they do something that gets us all killed."

Now it was Sage who looked way, troubled. "You think they might go that far? Have that capacity?"

"After what we saw was done to Mia? After what she told us they did? I'm saying that all bets are off. I don't think anyone should underestimate the 'Facility.'"

Sage nodded again. "Then as I said, help me." Then leaning back in her chair she added, "And I will help you."

Puzzled, Marc asked, "What do you mean?"

"I have listened to Wanderer." Sage made a quick shake of her head. "I don't agree with everything she says. But I will admit... we Souls need to rethink some of our actions. Not just here, but with the loss of the forest on the See Weeds' planet, and the Walking Flowers on Fire world. Some of us would argue we are taking worlds before we truly understand them."

Marc glowered. "Oh, you mean the complete subjugation of every race you come across might not be such a good idea?"

Sage cocked an eyebrow and her words grew condescending. "I would argue human history is full of your race conquering and subduing each other and anything else which remotely threatened you." Letting out a sigh, she went on, "But I am not arguing with you on our two races' pasts. I am here to make you an offer. Help me stop the 'Facility' and I will support Wanderer's plans for a lasting peace between our two peoples."

Another long pause went by as Marc considered Sage's offer. "How do I know I can trust you?" he said at last. "How do I know this isn't more lies from a Seeker to a Human? You offering me peace and then stabbing me in the back when we're done."

"You learned to trust Seeker Bright Moon on Fallen Snow," replied Sage softly. "The both of you set aside fear and anger and began to... care for each other. I am not her, but I am attempting to put aside my concerns and doubts about you. How do I know for sure I can trust you, Marc Walters? You might warn the human rebels in some way, lead me into a trap."

Marc scowled, "I don't know where they are."

"But if we work together, you may find out," reasoned Sage. "In the end, I will have to trust you and you will have to trust me."
Folding his arms, Marc moved his head slowly back and forth. "I can't just make this decision on my own. You're quite literally putting the fate of my entire race on my shoulders. I need to speak with the others."

"Then do so, Marc. Talk with your people," replied Sage of Tides gravely. "But quickly, I believe we are running out of time."

Chapter End Notes

AN - Sorry for the delay. A recent purchase of Alien: Isolation has tied up a good deal of my time. I'm love-hatting the game. As always, read, review, and enjoy.

-Walker
'There are so many Humans here,' whispered Sunlight Passing Through The Ice as Jodi sluggishly made her way into the San Gorgonio Memorial Hospital cafeteria. Indeed, the large rectangle room was filled with many people. Some eating a late breakfast while others using the space as an improvised meeting area.

Jodi fought down the urge to flinch at the sound of its voice in her head. Try as she may, she was unable to get It to stop talking. As she stood near the cafeteria's main doors, she felt like there was a giant sign above her head that read - 'My parasite is awake and chitchatting with me.' She could swear everyone was looking at her, staring slack-jawed. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe calmly in and out. Opening them after a few seconds she saw no one was watching her, everyone was either eating or planning for today's tasks. Paranoia and a lack of sleep were taking their toll on her.

'Jodi, you should eat something,' prompted the parasite as Jodi remained standing uncertainly at the entrance.

'Be quiet,' grumbled Jodi in her mind. Still worried these strange mental discussions would somehow be broadcasted for all those around her to hear.

A gurgle from her stomach coincided with the Sunlight's patient response, 'You're hungry. I can feel it. Please eat.'

'Fine,' she retorted irritably and crossed to table where several long rectangular serving trays were laid out. It was the same meal prepared every morning since she had arrived - reconstituted powdered eggs and sausages. At this late hour, the food was growing cold and Jodi resigned herself to eating rubbery eggs and slimy sausages. She made two valiant attempts to find some more orange juice in the makeshift kitchen before giving up.

Turning around, she scanned the room for anyone from her team. Jodi knew she was very late. It was strange Samantha, or one of the others, had not come to get her sooner. She remembered how exhausted and pained Samantha had looked last night. Maybe the older woman had overslept as well. But for right now, Jodi did not want to deal with anyone. Finding an empty spot table off to the side, she listlessly made her way to it and lurched into one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs.

Jodi's current exhaustion and an extreme tardiness came from interrogating Sunlight Passing Through The Ice for long hours in the middle of the night. When she was convinced the parasite had told her everything about her missing memories, Jodi then fretted if she went to sleep Sunlight would regain control of her body. The parasite insisted it could not do this, but Jodi was less than trusting. She had forced herself to stay awake until nearly dawn, but in the end exhaustion had caught her and she managed a few restless hours of sleep.

'I wasn't lying,' contended the parasite in it's gentle mental tone as Jodi thought back over the last few hours. 'If the body sleeps, I sleep too.'

Talking back to It felt tantamount to some type of defeat reflected Jodi as she stabbed her fork into the wrinkled sausage. She had spoken to Sunlight Passing Through The Ice, or Sunny as the parasite called itself, more than enough last night. While the parasite could not control her body, Jodi was unable to make it go back to sleep. Taking a bite out of her sausage she found it was at room temperature, letting out a sigh she pushed the food away and leaned back in the hard plastic chair. She now knew everything and had absolutely no idea what to do.
Kyle was alive. And more than just Kyle. A whole community of humans had survived the Soul's takeover of the world. Living in a cave system in the middle of the desert was not exactly the high life, but it beat the alternative of being turned into a puppet. But what was truly the strangest about this band of rebels was who else lived among them...Souls. As impossible as it seemed, Sunny along with a Soul named Wanderer, had been happily living with these humans for some time now. It seemed at least a few of the parasites thought they were wrong about the invasion. They helped the humans and provided protection from others of their kind.

Now her memory loss made more sense. When confronted by the Seekers in the farmers market, Sunny had tried to hold on and protect the memories of Kyle and the other humans. With Jeremy's intervention, those memories were buried when the CURE pushed Sunny into dormancy. Jodi's recovered mind was unable to access them until somehow Sunny woke up.

How or why this happened still eluded Jodi. Had something gone wrong with the CURE medication she had been exposed to? Samantha had said they were in uncharted territory with the human mind, was this some sort of side effect? And what was she supposed to do now? She really had no idea and she was not interested in getting Sunny's opinion.

Jodi's private reverie was abruptly broken when shouts boomed from the outside hallway. A man rushed in, panting. He was a big man, with broad shoulders and well-muscled arms and legs. As imposing as he looked there was gentleness to his body. Like a child, pure and guileless. And his face contained the terror of a child.

"Please help me! Something is very wrong with the Healers!" he cried to the crowd in the cafeteria.

The room went very, very quiet. Everyone stared at the large man with the sheen of silver in his eyes. "Please," he repeated as he gulped in air. "I think they're...they're..."

"Human?" finished someone in the room, the word taking on a distinctly ominous quality.

Realization spread like a slow lit fire across his face. His mouth sagged open as he stared in utter disbelief as he grasped the true nature of the people filling the room.

"Stop him!" someone shouted from down the hallway. Jodi knew that voice. It was Denis. He rushed in with Carol and Jake trailing just behind him. Multiple people had jumped up at Denis's order and now were closing on the large man. Denis, Jake, and those from the cafeteria spread out, allowing no escape for the Soul.

Nearly everyone else was on their feet. With her smaller size, Jodi brushed past several people attempting to get an unobstructed view. The Soul was jerking his head back and forth at the advancing humans. He beheld them as if they were a pack of wolves. His eyes were wide with fright and his whole body trembled. Sunny was suddenly very present in her mind. An almost imperceptible shiver ran through Jodi's body.

'Help him,' quivered Sunny in her mind.

'Are you insane?' balked Jodi. 'He's the enemy!'

"Easy," warned Carol to the people moving in on the Soul. It was clear the alien saw there was no escape. "He'll kill his host if we're not careful."

Hearing Carol's words, the Soul turned towards her. "W-Where a-are the H-Healers?" he stuttered.

"Gone," replied Carol coolly.
The Soul closed his eyes and bowed his head, a momentary pause of grief before the end. But Carol leaped forward. "Don't you dare!" she cried. "Don't even try it! You think shredding your host's brain is going to be an escape?"

Opening his eyes, tears began to tumble down his face. "My final death..." he whimpered out.

Carol took another step closer. The Soul cowered before her. Physically the old woman was far smaller than the larger man, but she dominated over him. Jodi could see Carol held one of the gray cylinders for the CURE in her right hand. She inched every closer, ready to use it.

"It won't be final," spat Carol. "If you kill the human you're in, your little worm body will live on long enough for us to pull you out." Her voice grew cruel. "Long enough to make you suffer."

Something like pins and needles traveled down Jodi's legs. Sunny was trying to urge her body forward. 'Please Jodi!' came it's pleading thought. 'They're scaring him!'

Clenching her jaw tight, Jodi gave a vicious mental shove and pushed the parasite's mind into the back of her skull, chaining it there. 'Shut up!' she screamed with the entity of her mind. Once again this war waged completely in her brain left her feeling physically exhausted. Feeling like her whole body was about to fold in on itself, she dropped into a nearby chair.

Jodi pushed herself to focus on the external crisis and away from her internal problems. Now only a few feet separated Carol and the Soul. The old woman was still talking, relating the story of her capture by the Souls. "...I was surrounded by Seekers. Nowhere to run, just like you. And this one Seeker, had a big old stupid smile on his face, told me not to be afraid. It was just like going to sleep." Closing, she added, "And it will be the same for you."

"Then what happens to me?" whispered the Soul, almost too softly to be heard.

"Who the hell cares?" answered Carol and the Soul went ashen. Darting in, she pushed the gray canister into his face. The jet of black colored CURE engulfed the Soul's head. Before the gas had even started to disperse, the body collapsed to the floor with a loud thud. Jake and Denis rushed forward to the fallen man while others pulled pack to give them space. Jake checked the man's pulse and made a small nod of his head with a smile. He was still alive.

As some went back to their meals or meetings, a few helped Jake and Denis to move the unconscious man to a stretcher. Normalcy was quickly reasserting itself amount the rebels. But Jodi felt she was tossed into another world. Sunny sobbed in the back of her mind. A surge of guilt and grief over the unnamed Soul was steadily coming out of the parasite. And these emotions were leaking into Jodi. They tugged at her owns feeling, weighing them down. Made her eyes smart and a deeply despaired sigh come from her lips.

'Stop it,' ordered Jodi.

Sunny's response was grief-stricken, but also held an ember of indignation. 'None of you needed to be so cruel. He was frightened and didn't understand what was happening.'

'He was going to kill himself,' objected Jodi. 'And if he escaped, he would have run right to the Seekers. What do think they would do? Join us for tea and cookies?'

Jodi could feel Sunny mull over her argument. The separation between their two minds was like a thick gauze. Somethings, like their emotions, seem to pass through easily. But actual thoughts and memories were more complicated. The wash of despair from Sunny began to lessen. Replaced with a resigned sense of calm.
'You could have explained it to him, Jodi,' whispered Sunny. 'Let him know he had to give his body back. Store him in a cryotank and tell him he would be sent somewhere safe.'

'Huh,' pushed back Jodi. 'A kindness never given to any of us Humans. Everything is all about you guys, isn't it?'

'You're wrong. I gave you back.' Sunny's objection surprised Jodi. And the gauze in her mind was pushed aside as Sunny showed her memories of when she had first come to the caves with Kyle. Of how she had wept bitter tears as Kyle explained she was to be removed to let Jodi have her body back. But the removal had not returned Jodi's conscious. Kyle had then made the difficult decision to return Sunny to her body. Yet Sunny had not given up. She had continued to search for Jodi. Looking for any sign of her, somewhere long buried in her own mind. Long talks with the Soul named Wanderer in hopes she might find a way to return Jodi to herself.

'I tried,' said Sunny in Jodi's mind. 'I really did. I tried to bring you back. And I am sorry for what I did to you and for what my kind have done.'

Now some of the guilt Jodi felt now was her own. Whether it was from lashing out at Sunny or failing to intercede with the frightened Soul, she was not sure. But the feelings of remorse hung on to her. It joined her lack of sleep, indecision, and general frustration in weighing her down. Another exhausted sigh worked itself out of her while she stared blankly at nearby table.

A voice cut through Jodi's seesawing mental state. A very irritated voice. "Where have you been?"

Jodi looked up to see Carol looking down at her, an angry frown on her narrow lips. But before either woman could say anything further another voice rose up. Loud enough to bring everyone to a standstill.

"What the hell happened here!?” demanded Director Smith as he stood in the cafeteria's entrance.

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Melanie pulled two water bottles from the cooler's shelf. She played a quick balancing act as she transferred the cold plastic containers from one hand to the next and then to the shopping basket at her feet. The two joined four already there. The water in the bottles sloshed a bit as she closed the cooler's glass door. Making a quick scan of the convenient store's refrigerated section, she decided the water would have to do. Anything else stored at such a low temperature would not survive the journey back to Arizona.

It was disheartening, reflected Melanie. The store she stood in had enough food supplies to last their little community several weeks. But there would be no way to take it without drawing considerable attention. Their aborted raid had not even brought in even a quarter of the needed supplies. It looked like onion soup, and baked hard rolls looked to be a large part of her future. Truthfully even cave rations were in doubt. With the real chance Jeb's hideout had been compromised, all of them would be looking for a new shelter. Where would home be now? Shaking her head sadly, Melanie picked up the basket and made her way to the checkout counter. There was a modest line of customers leading to the single Soul working the checkout line. She had short frizzy blonde hair and smiled good-naturedly as ran items over her station's scanner.

As she neared the line, the conversation from a middle-aged couple reached her ears. A woman with an oval face framed by chocolate brown hair was speaking. "...Those poor people, they've had
such problems in Chicago for the last few months." At hearing the topic being discussed, Melanie immediately leaned closer.

"Well," replied the man with blonde hair so pale it could almost be called white. "The Seekers have finally caught those Humans hiding in the sewers. I suspect they won't be causing the city any more trouble."

The woman made an unpleasant sound in her throat. "Ugh, how could anyone live in a sewer?"

"I suspect their living conditions had more to do with planning attacks on us than comfort," replied the man dryly.

Melanie had to choke down her rising ire over the two Souls erroneous beliefs about the Chicago rebels. But she found her curiosity overrode her anger. These Souls knew something of what had happened.

"What happened to the humans?" she asked and found herself surprised she had spoken the question out loud. The two Souls turned to her and stared. Melanie could have smacked her own forehead at her stupidity. The last thing she needed to do right now was to bring unwanted attention. She was so very glad she was wearing the contacts. Her eyes, at least, would not give her away.

"Umm...Sorry," she offered in apology. "Didn't mean to listen in." Her mind rushed for an explanation to cover her question. "I've got some friends in Chicago. But hadn't heard from them...umm...latest developments." The carefully worded truth worked better than an outright lie.

The woman smiled at her but quickly grew worried. "Oh dear, I hope your friends have not been troubled by all the problems in that city."

"Oh no, I'm sure they're fine," explained Melanie. Thinking she was one of them, the Soul's worry for her and her friends was natural. But since she had been stupid enough to bring herself into this conversation, Melanie hoped to find out what had happened to her people. "I was curious if you had heard what happened to the Humans?"

"Well..." began the man hesitantly. "I don't know. No one has said anything. I assumed the Seekers took care of...them." He offered the last word with an uneasy frown as if the whole idea of the final fate of the humans was too troubling to consider. Melanie felt her stomach drop. He gave her an odd look. "Why do you want to know?"

The line slunk forward, and they all moved closer to the checkout. Melanie wished it would move much faster. "Oh...you see my friends and I have talked about the Humans in Chicago before. Just guessing who and what they'd be like," said Melanie as she tried to find a way out of the discussion.

"An unpleasant topic," replied the woman.

"It's quite the topic in Chicago," lied Melanie. "Everyone seems to be talking about the Humans." She was rapidly coming to the conclusion these two Souls were just speculating and did not know anything. Hopefully, her little deception would convince them the innocence of her question.

The man shrugged, and the line move forward again. "Hmm, I guess I can understand why. Rumors really have been flying. The Seekers have said very little in the last few days, and that is somewhat strange."
"They could just be being thorough," pointed out the woman. "You know the Seekers love to be successful in their calling. Remember how much time Seeker Deep Roots will work when he's on a case."

Nodding, the man smiled. "Ah yes, Deep Roots. He does put in the hours." He paused in thought. "He must be on a case now. Haven't seen any sign of him in days."

The two Souls went on to discuss their neighbor, apparently a Seeker, and his lack of presence when their neighborhood came together to clean the area's road and sidewalks. Forgotten for the moment, Melanie sighed in relief as the couple was the next to check out. Then, finally, she putting her items on counter to be scanned. She only had the water and a few snacks in her basket. Once done, she was quickly through the store's door before the frizzy haired clerk could even say goodbye. Jared and Kyle would be getting worried as to why it was taking her so long.

Outside the store, Melanie saw both men were waiting for her. They sat in Jared's Jeep next to one the store's gas pumps. Their eyes were ever watchful behind their sunglasses. Starting towards the two men, she saw the Soul couple from the store getting into their car. The woman noticed her and waved, saying, "I hope you hear from your friends soon."

"So do I," muttered Melanie under her breath as she returned the wave. She watched them drive off and then headed for the Jeep.

"Making new friends?" asked Jared mildly as she got into the passenger seat.

"Not really," replied Melanie as she pulled on her seatbelt. "In the store they were talking about the Seekers in Chicago. I asked them what they heard, but it wasn't much."

As Jared started the Jeep's engine, Kyle asked, "What did they know?"

"Nothing we've not already heard. They say the Seekers aren't saying much."

They were quickly on to the road, and Jared's attention focused on getting to the interstate. But after a few minutes he asked. "Is that normal? The Seekers not saying anything?"

Melanie thought about what she knew of Soul behavior. She, better than most humans understood how they thought. Souls were not ones to sensationalize, but it was odd for the Seekers to go silent after publicly hunting for Marc and the others for so long. Even something as simple as a reassurance to the population would have been normal.

When she explained this, Kyle leaned forward in the back seat. "It's like I was telling you, Jared. Something big is going down. We should be checking this hospital in Banning out."

Jared made a short, pained noise in the back of his throat. "Kyle," he said plainly, "I've been over this. We're not going to stop at hospital that's likely ground zero for some Seeker secret operation."

Kyle snorted loudly from his seat. "It's not like I'm saying we go up and knock on the front door. I'm just saying we should find out what's going on." His voice angry at first grew softer. "Just so I know...I promised I would take care of her."

Melanie shifted in her seat and glanced back at the elder O'Shea brother. He did not look like he had gotten much sleep last night. Even his sunglasses did not completely cover the fatigue that must have been dominant in his eyes. He was clearly still mourning for Sunny and worried for Ian's safety. All she had to offer him was a sad little smile of understanding. "When we get back to Jeb's and get everyone safe," she said, "then we'll figure out our next move."
"Please," said Kyle with a tired smirk as he pushed back into his seat. He looked like he was going to try to get some sleep. "I already know what you two are going to do." He let out an enormous yawn. "You'll be heading to Chicago next." He paused for a few seconds before adding, "I likely go with you. Someone's got to save my fool brother."

Glancing to Jared, Melanie saw a resigned smile pass over his face. Kyle was right. They both had been thinking the same thing. She settled back in her seat and thought about Wanda, Ian, and the others. What had happened to them? Had the Seekers left any of them alive? Unfortunately, the answers would have to wait.

Maneuvering through the morning rush hour, she saw the sign for the I-10 interstate interchange was up ahead. Jared turned his blinker on and they were quickly heading down the ramp to join the traffic on the highway. Keeping to the speed limit, they moved at a decent pace, heading out the city. Melanie settled back into her seat. The trip ahead would take most of the day, and they would have to be very careful once they reached Picacho Peak.

She handed a water bottle to Jared when he asked, but, for the most part, the three of them spoke little as they traveled down the highway. Melanie found herself jumping from one worry to the next. First Jamie, then Jeb, and then Wanda. Too many. Too much at one time. She had to concentrate on one catastrophe at time.

To distract herself, Melanie looked out her window. Watched as the city began to recede. They were passing by the suburbia of Los Angeles. From the highway rows of houses and buildings passed by in a blur. She saw people working in their yards, going shopping, and hundred other mundane daily routines. It was easy to forget the people she was watching were all Souls. So utterly ordinary.

They passed a road sign, indicating the distances to the next few exits. Calimesa was next, followed by Beaumont, and then Banning. The highway would bring them close to the little town and the mysterious San Gorgonio Memorial Hospital. It would be unlikely she would see the hospital as they sped past. But even if she could, what did she expect to see? Big spotlights advertising the Seekers' master plan in the sky?

A soft snore came from the back of the Jeep, confirming Kyle was indeed sleeping. Melanie considered doing the same, but she should remain alert. They never could be too careful. But even as she acted as the silent watcher for Jared, she had begun to drift off. Only when she felt the Jeep start to decelerate did she push herself up in her seat. Suddenly alert.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Jared's eyes were focused on road. "Looks like construction."

Melanie's eyes wandered over the road. On the left side of the road, a neat row of orange and white striped barrels closed off one of the lanes. Around them, other cars and trucks were slowing as well. Further away from the city, the traffic had thinned out considerably. But the construction constricted the road and forced the steady stream of vehicles to line up into a slow moving line.

"Ehh," grunted Jared. "Even the Souls can't stop traffic jams."

As they slowly moved forward, Melanie saw the right most lane was now also closed off as well, further compressing the traffic. Construction barrels with their bright orange and clear white stripes as far as she could see. Their pace slackened again and then the car in front of them came to a complete stop.
"Well, so much for making good time," grumbled Jared as he followed suit and stopped the Jeep.

Craning her neck, Melanie attempted to deduce how far this construction area went. It was hard to tell as the highway ahead rose and fell. The vehicles ahead began to move, and Jared once again edged them forward. As they climbed a gentle rise in the road, Melanie caught sight of another sign. The exit to Banning was directly ahead. A little nervous tick passed through her, off all the places to be delayed.

A soft sputter came from the back seat and Melanie heard sounds of Kyle waking. "Meh," he murmured sleepily. "We stopping to eat?"

"No, traffic and construction," replied Jared tonelessly.

They stopped and started twice more. On their third stop, Melanie could make out what was happening. Ahead the bridge crossing the local underpass was closed off as heavy construction equipment worked away. Two men were directing the highway's traffic through the exit ramp to Banning. Both of them dressed in a bright reflective neon green shirts and yellow hardhats of construction workers. In the bright morning sun, they wore wraparound sunglasses to shield their eyes from the glare. Each one held a large pole with a round sign on top. On one side it read, "Slow" and the other side, "Stop". Acting as gatekeepers, these two workers were slowly letting traffic move forward.

As she watched one of the workers would approach each car and truck and briefly speak to the driver. Then they would let the traffic move forward. It all seemed very friendly, they would wave to people in the vehicles and the traveling Souls would wave back.

"Ugh," bemoaned Kyle. "Why do the Souls have to be so friendly about everything? It's just some road work. Do they need to chit-chat with everyone?"

Seeing it was very likely Jared would have to talk to construction crew, Melanie asked, "Do you want me to switch with you? I've got the contacts."

Jared thought it over but then shook his head. "No, if we change seats now it will look suspicious." He glanced in rear-view mirror and checked his sunglasses. "I don't think it will matter. It's a sunny day out. They're wearing sunglasses and I'm wearing sunglasses. No one will think anything of it."

Another round of stopping and then painstakingly moving forward brought them to the two workers. One approached the Jeep, unhurriedly and relaxed. He made a motion to roll down the Jared window. With a nod, Jared complied.

"Morning folks," said the man with gentle smile. With his tinted glasses, it was impossible to tell for sure, but he seemed to securitize Jared, then Melanie, and finally Kyle. "I'm so sorry about the delay. But we'll get you through in a few minutes." Still smiling, he asked, "Heading through or stopping at Banning?"

"Heading through," replied Jared with a mild smile of his own.

"Alright then, just head down the ramp. It will get you right around this mess" said the man. Turning away, he waved them forward. As the Jeep began to roll forward, he offered them a final goodbye, "You all have a good day."

"Glad that's over with," sighed Kyle.

She was about to agree with him when she noticed Jared. He his hands had tightened on the steering wheel. In fact, his whole body was still while his sun-soaked skin had gone pale. Jared's
sudden change triggered a rush of dread in Melanie.

Anxiously she asked, "Jared, what's wrong?"

In a very quiet voice, as if he was concerned someone would be listening in, he said. "Those two Souls back there were carrying guns."

"What?!" Melanie twisted around in her seat, trying to see how it was possible she would have missed something so obvious.

"He was wearing a holster behind his back," explained Jared. "I could see its outline against his shirt when he turned around. The other guy had one too."

A frown creased Kyle's face and he shifted in Jeep's back seat until he had nearly turned around. Watching out the window as they moved forward, he asked, "Are you positive? Couldn't it just be a tool belt or something?"

Jared's voice carried his conviction. "I'm sure of it." His eyes scrutinized the other workers. "I think they're all armed."

"Seekers," whispered Melanie as they passed another group workers in the process of unloading a giant bulldozer from a trailer.

They were slowly descending the exit ramp to Banning. More construction vehicles were splayed out at the bottom of the ramp. An assortment of dump trucks, backhoes, and other construction equipment were busy working on the road. Ahead the end of the off-ramp narrowed to a single lane and then disappeared as it turned to the left and went under the bridge. With the overpass above and the heavy machinery around it, the single open lane turned into a tunnel. Dark and looming as their detour traveled through. And massed about the entrance were dozens of people, all dressed in the same construction worker outfits.

Kyle's frown deepened into a scowl as he looked about. "What the hell are we driving into?" he asked as they neared the end of the turnoff.

"It's a choke point," said Jared. His eyes were sharp and focused on the ever nearing bridge and its artificial tunnel. "Someone drives in there they can cut them off and box them in a few seconds."

"For us?" shuddered Melanie as they rolled closer.

"I don't know and I don't want to find out," announced Jared. Abruptly he jerked the steering wheel and the Jeep shifted to the right. There was a flash of fluorescent green as a man dove out of the way when Jared turned off the road. The Jeep and its passengers bounced and jostled as they took the uneven ground between the off-ramp and the neighboring street.

They sped around a parked dump truck and then back to the solid road. They passed the construction zone. A moment of hard acceleration pushed Melanie back in her seat. "Jared, you can't drive like this!" she cried as they veered again and rushed past several parked cars. "Way too reckless!"

"Beats the hell out of getting caught in a Seeker's trap," shot back Jared as he swung them onto another street. Sending them deeper into the city of Banning.
"What in the hell is that?" exclaimed Joe Tanner as a dark colored Jeep suddenly veered out of the slow procession of vehicles and launched itself past one of their dump trucks. He watched as the driver swerved recklessly around their equipment and nearly hit one of his squad members.

By his side, Tom Rainer tracked the Jeep's movements. There was enough background noise from the others working to prepare their ambush he had to raise his voice for his question to be heard. "Did we spook one of them?"

"Don't know," replied Joe as the Jeep successfully maneuvered back onto the road and accelerated. He glanced back to the detoured cars running through their fake construction zone. A few of the drivers had noticed the strange and dangerous driver and had slowed to a stop. The last thing they needed now was to tip their hand and cause these parasites to panic. Not when they were so close.

"Reassure them," he commanded Tom, indicating the stationary cars. "Let them know we're handling it."

Tom leaned in, "What exactly do you want me to tell the worms?"

Joe considered. Souls were always truthful and sometimes the best lies used the truth with just a detail or two left out. "Tell them the truth, we don't know why the driver drove away. But we're contacting the authorities. But tell them it's not safe to stay here and to keep moving."

"Right-o boss," said Tom as he flourished his best I'm-a-friendly-parasite smile and headed to unmoving vehicles.

Meanwhile, Joe ducked behind an idling dump truck and pulled his walkie-talkie from his belt. The steady thrum of jackhammers faded by the shielding truck. Pressing down on the talk button, he said, "Madison, we've got a drive off at the construction site. Lurched past our barriers. Last seen heading north on Sunset Ave."

A pause of static went by and then Madison Brinsfield replied. "Alright, I'm moving in. Any idea who they are?"

"None," replied Joe. The worm driver of the Jeep might have seen something, maybe one of their concealed weapons. "Just get it contained before the convoy shows up."

Joe leaned around the dump truck and saw Tom had gotten the motorist moving again. Good, at least their trap was still ready to go. He switched to the open channel and addressed all the 'construction workers.' "Everyone stay focused. Madison is handling our panicked driver. And remember - no weapons till our target is in sight."

An assortment of quick responses came back over the radio and Joe felt a slight beat of relief settle in his body. He hoped Craig's team working in downtown LA was going well. They were taking a major risk with this very public operation. But if he and Craig were successful, they would have all the remaining Seekers of area in one fell swoop.

It had been a little over a week ago Joe Tanner had been returned to himself. Waking to a world caught in nightmare. He had despaired at first, it was utterly hopeless. How could they ever manage to take on a world filled with these parasitical worms? But Craig Williams had showed him how. One person at a time and their ranks had slowly filled. Craig seemed driven by some internal fire, this man with the fake silver eyes, he had complete conviction they would win. And now, just mere days later, they were closing in the last of the Seekers.

Joe watched as an assortment of cars and trucks drove through the false construction area. Delivery
trucks with drivers in crisp brown uniforms. Old couples on their way to visit friends. Families with young children off for a weekend vacation. All of these lives stolen, taken by the worms. It was easy to hate theses parasites and want their destruction. But Craig had explained much to him. Of how there would be sacrifices and how a new order would have to be established if any of them were to survive. He would still loath these aliens worms. But if these parasites could learn their...place, well, Joe could show a little benevolence.

The radio on his belt chirped and Joe was pulled from his thoughts of the future. He needed to focus on the present. "Convey sighted," squawked the walkie-talkie and he felt the edgy wave of anticipation run through his body.

"Everyone to their stations," he called over the radio. "We rehearsed this all yesterday. We know exactly what to do." Joe paused, he felt like he needed to add something. He clicked the send button again and added, "For our people and for our world, let's get this done."

The two dozen men and women under his command did not have time to reply to his rallying order. But they did not need to. Joe could see the reactions on their faces. Something almost feral, fierce and strong. They would not fail.

Traffic from the off-ramp slowed to a trickle. Tom jumped into the idling dump truck. Brandon took position on the backhoe. Joe felt the weight of the gun in its hostler on his back. Time stretched as they waited, each second seemed an hour.

"Three Seeker SUVs just started down the ramp," came a response from the radio.

"Drop in the bulldozer," ordered Joe. "Keep the traffic on the highway stalled."

Two smallish cars turned came off the ramp and moved painstakingly slow through the un-sprung trap. Joe felt his jaw locking tight. "Move, damn it," he growled to himself as the cars passed.

And then the first black SUV, gleaming like an overgrown black beetle, turned into the detour. Not a normal SUV, but one of reinforced armor and bulletproof windows. Two more, identical in every way, followed. The three lumbering vehicles slowed as they began to pass under the bridge. Something, and Joe would never be certain what gave them away, caused the lead SUV to suddenly accelerate forward.

"Now!" screamed Joe.

The first SUV, wheels screeching as it lurched ahead, was cut off as Brandon sent the backhoe crashing into the front of vehicle. At the same time, Tom reversed the dump truck and sent it slamming into rear of the last SUV. Trapping all three Seeker transports. With a whirl of hydraulics the backhoe's boom swung down and shattered the lead SUV's windshield. Within the SUV figures moved, trying to free themselves from what had been safe and secure only seconds ago.

Joe rushed forward, his weapon already in hand. "Get in there," he ordered, and more than a dozen men and women rushed in. Portable industrial saws, used to cut straight through steel beams, were swiftly brought in. Metal screamed as the blades cut into the black armor. Crowbars hacked at the weakened structure of the doors. As soon as a fist-sized hole was punched into the side, a gas grenade was shoved into the hole. Soon all three SUVs were filled with blackish clouds.

One of the doors on the second SUV was wrenched open from the inside. From the interior, black-grey clouds of the CURE billowed out. A figure in black stumbled away from the SUV. His head was oddly misshapen. It did not take Joe long to realize the man was wearing a gas mask. It
appeared the Seekers were better prepared than they anticipated.

But it did not matter. Joe and the others were ready. Before the Seeker could even straighten, a bullet caught him in the head. He fell to the ground as more of Joe’s team swarmed over the three vehicles. Two more shots rang out, fired into the interior of the last SUV. All the noise of the gunfire drowned out by constant racket of jackhammers and motorized construction equipment. Within minutes, it was all over.

As Joe and two others grabbed the fallen Seeker, his walkie-talkie let out squeal. "Hey! How we doing down there?" came an urgent request from his team above. "The buggers are starting to get a little jumpy. They want to know if something is wrong." Joe could only image just how backed up the traffic was on the highway.

"Bulldozer still in place?" he asked.

"Yeah, no one saw a thing. Hell I didn't even hear anything," came the amused response.

"We're secure down here, but we need to clean the site," he replied. "Just keep being friendly and let the things know traffic will be moving shortly."

The backhoe was pulled away and the first SUV, while damaged, was still drivable. Working quickly they would have it and two others off the road and covered up. Soon there would be no sign the ambush had ever happened. Joe was just about ready to get the second SUV moving when his radio once again squawked.

Joe answered and it was Madison. In the rush of the battle he had forgotten about the runaway Jeep. "Did you get them?" he asked Madison.

Her response was strange, like the words staggered out of her mouth, confused and shocked. "Joe," said Madison, "We've got a situation."

Melanie had one hell of a headache. Partly because when they were captured she had been forcefully pushed to the ground. Her head taking a wicked smack against the pavement. But she had also inhaled a relatively generous dose of a seriously bad smelling blackish cloud. It had stung her eyes and burned her throat. Now, nearly an hour later, the sooty smell of it still lingered.

"Umm...here," and a glass of water was offered to her by the woman. She was dressed like a Seeker. Black dress pants and shirt. The holster with a gun on her belt. But she was human, just like Melanie. Her name was Madison Brinsfield.

Taking the offered glass, Melanie drank it down in one gulp. "Thanks," she offered to Madison. The cold water did help on her sore throat.

"I know the stuff stinks," replied Madison with a slight smile. "Can really get stuck in your hair."

"Yeah," said Kyle slowly. He was sitting on the couch to the right of her. "What exactly was that stuff you sprayed us with?"

"It's called CURE," answered Madison. She sat down on the edge of a desk crowded with papers and a rather outdated typewriter. They three of them were in the back office of what Melanie assumed was an auto shop. Right outside the little room sat two dark Seeker patrol cars surrounded
Kyle rubbed the back of neck. He likely was still a little sore from their very abrupt stop. "What does it cure?"

"Well, for Humans like you and me..." Madison paused and made a rather embarrassed smile at Melanie. "I don't mean to exclude you, Melanie. And again, sorry about the whole mistaken identity. But those contacts were pretty convincing."

"Right," said Melanie a bit absently. She was still worried about Jared, even though Madison had repeatedly promised they had a doctor checking him out.

"So, anyway," said Madison as she went back to her original explanation. "The CURE doesn't do anything to a Human. But to a Soul, it will knock them out. Force the parasite into a state similar to hibernation."

Melanie was trying and failing to wrap her head around what this woman was talking about. She had never heard of the Souls using such a medicine before. Was it something new? How had Madison and the others gotten hold of it? But before Madison could explain in more detail or Melanie could ask additional questions the door to the office opened.

"Jared!" crooned Melanie as she took sight of him standing in the doorway. Swiftly she jumped up off the couch and wrapped her arms protectively around him.

"Hey baby," smiled Jared as he pulled her close.

She pressed her face into his chest. Warm and solid and she could hear his heart beating through his shirt. It's steady rhythm reassuring. "Are you alright?" she whispered.

"Not fun getting shot," replied Jared. "But they also have an excellent doc. She patched me right up."

Madison spoke up, the guilt in her voice was still prevalent. "Yeah, Marge is amazing. When she was still a bugger, she headed up the emergency ward of the local hospital."

Turning from Jared, Melanie stared in confusion at Madison. "She used to be a Soul?"

"Uh...yeah," said Madison self-consciously. She let out a sigh. "Umm...Seeing as you're originally human I'm guessing you guys don't know much about how the parasites work in the body."

Melanie was about to reply she, in fact, knew a great deal about having a parasite in her body. But she stopped herself. They knew very little about these Humans and how they had managed to acquire so much of the Seekers' tools and equipment. Their escape from the construction site had been quickly cut short by Madison and her team. Boxed in by four Seeker patrol cars, Melanie, Jared, and Kyle had thought it the end. At the same time, Madison and her team thought them to be possible Seekers. The mistaken identity had led to Jared getting shot in the leg by Madison. If it had not been for Kyle acting very human, bellowing in rage and preparing to smash someone's skull in, it could have ended much worse. But now Melanie was uncertain how these people would react to hearing a Soul had possessed her. A Soul who would eventually become her best friend.

"Oh," said someone from the outside garage, "she actually does." The voice was oddly familiar, but Melanie could not remember when she had heard it before. A man's voice, with a slight southern accent. She shifted and turned in Jared's tender embrace so she could see the speaker. When she saw him, the very blood in her veins froze solid.
"Well now," said Craig Williams as walked up with a faint smile. "Isn't this a small world?" His smile grew larger while his eyes twinkled with both amusement and rings of silver. "I never forget a face. It's Melanie, right?"
"We have protocols in place for a reason," lectured Smith as he stood before Carol, Jake, Denis, and Jodi. "Procuring one of the infested should always be handled by a team of at least four. If you weren't ready, the operation should have been passed off to another team."

Reactions to Smith criticism was across the board. Denis looked like a chastised schoolboy, Carol rolled her eyes while giving a faint shake of her head, and Jake looked thoroughly bored. But for Jodi, Smith's irritation at the near disastrous capture of the Soul in the cafeteria only added to the rollercoaster of emotions whirling around in her mind.

'I know you're angry with us,' whimpered Sunny in the back of Jodi's mind. 'We didn't mean to hurt anyone. Other races aren't like you, it's wasn't enslavement with them. We were only trying to help."

Outwardly Jodi sat at an oval table in one of the hospital's unused conference room, getting dressed down by Smith. Unheard by the others, a silent pleading by the parasite had been going on for a while now. After witnessing the other Soul's capture and scope of the other Humans activities at the hospital, Sunny had attempted to defend her kind's actions on Earth.

Finally becoming feed up with Sunny's begging, Jodi shot back, 'What do you want me to do!? Huh!? If you have some ideas, please share!'

A long pause followed and then Sunny replied, a little bashful, 'Find Kyle.' And memories came with that answer. One of seeing Kyle with his crooked nose and a wide grin, another of a soccer game being played in the blueish light of solar-powered lamps, and lastly one of Kyle's big arms wrapping around her, holding Jodi close.

No, the memory was not of Kyle holding her, it was of Kyle holding Sunny. Jodi could feel the Soul longing to be with him. To be comforted by him and to take solace and safety in his embrace. An ache began in Jodi's heart and it was such a strange feeling. It was simultaneously love and betrayal, joy and sorrow.

"Jodi."

The doubly complicated emotions of both Jodi and Sunny in their shared heart throbbed. It was all too much. Just too much. How was she supposed to deal with it?

'I know,' said Sunny miserably, feeling the same as Jodi. 'I don't mean to hurt you like this. But I can't help it...'

"Jodi!"

Startled, Jodi pitched in her seat. Around the table, all eyes were on her. Carol cocked her head to the side, a blend of concern and confusion on her lined face. "Jodi, what's wrong with you? You've been acting strange all this morning."

She tried her best to not flinch at Carol's comment, but her body still let out a little shudder. Stifling a groan, Jodi mumbled out, "Sorry, didn't sleep well last night. I'm just...really out of it."
Carol gave her an unsympathetic nod of the head. "Mr. Smith was asking you a question."

Jodi looked to the end of the table and found Director Smith with his arms crossed and an impatient frown on his face. "I was asking why you weren't helping the others. You just overslept?" With a touch of concern in his voice he added, "Nothing else is wrong? No new recovered memories?"

'Oh, yeah, a bunch,' glowered Jodi to herself. But she was not ready to tell anyone about Sunny. Not until she figured out what was her next step. What she ended up saying aloud was - "No, nothing new. I'm just tired. That's all." Turning to Carol, she apologized. "Sorry I wasn't there to help you guys. Normally Samantha wakes me up in the morning."

Pausing, Jodi glanced around the room, realizing after all this time she still had not seen her friend. Then she remembered how Samantha had not been feeling well the night before. That was before Sunny had woken up. It seemed liked she had last spoken to Samantha months ago.

"Umm," she started falteringly, "Where is Samantha? She wasn't feeling well last night. Is she alright?"

Smith, who was once again reviewing his tablet computer, did not bother to look up when he answered. "Doctor Greer is downtown working on with Seeker HQ operation. As far as I know she's okay."

Denis then started with a series of question about the mission. Distracted by Sunny, Jodi had not heard much about the state of Seekers in the city. From Smith's responses it sounded like soon there would not be any Seekers left.

This launched Sunny into another round of persuasion. 'If we could find Kyle and the others, we could figure out what to do. I'm sure Melanie or Jared could talk to the Humans here and let them know we don't have to fight.'

'You think it's just going to be that simple. Let's all be friends and everything is forgiven?' retorted Jodi.

A mental sigh came from the Soul. 'I know it's not that simple. But there are more Souls like me. Wanderer and Ian went to Chicago to find Humans who were attempting to find peace with my kind. Isn't it worth trying?'

Attempting to put aside the fact one of the reasons why Sunny wanted to find the others was to reunite with Kyle, Jodi considered the Soul's request. On the face of it, the idea sounded ludicrous. And yet as Sunny shared memories of her time in the caves, Jodi began to wonder about the possibility. It was often hard work in those dusty caverns, but Sunny remembered it fondly. Humans and Souls were living together. In fact, more than just living together. Jodi caught a memory of Sunny's –

She sat with Kyle, his younger brother Ian, and Wanderer in the part of the cave system making up the rebel's Kitchen. They were playing a card game after dinner and a laidback laughter floated around them. Ian trumped one of Kyle's hands, and he whooped in celebration. Turning to Wanderer, Ian he said, "Love, you're my good luck charm." Then he bent down and kissed her full on the lips and a deep blush spread across the other Soul.

Lost in the old memories with Kyle and the others, Jodi felt Sunny softly speak. "We shouldn't fight. If you would just try to explain to the others of my kind. Make them understand you don't mean them harm. Explain to them they have to give the bodies back."
A stillness went over everyone in the room and Jodi slowly realized Sunny had spoken out loud. With her mouth. Somehow the Soul had temporarily taken control. It was not intentional, for Sunny was just a stunned as Jodi. The gentle words of the Soul had slipped out so normally and naturally Jodi had almost not noticed.

But Smith had most certainly detected the change in tone and the appeal for peace. For he was now standing over her, his eyes wide. "What did you just say?"

"I never forget a face. It's Melanie, right?"

The man who spoke to Mel wore a welcoming smile. To Jared the smile hinted at something else. It was hard to define. A friendly smile, perhaps, but also with an edge of danger. Melanie had gone so still in his embrace when she saw him approach. And now she swayed ever so slightly in his arms. A tiny motion of her body. Who was this man and how did he know his Mel? Then Jared realized Melanie was not swaying; she was trembling.

Jared's leg was still a little sore from his recent erroneous altercation with Madison. But he shifted his weight smoothly enough, keeping Melanie close but with the net effect of putting himself between her and the stranger. It was only then he could see the silver glint in the man's eyes. A Soul. He felt his body stiffen.

"Sir, you know these people?" It was Madison. Jared did not turn to look at the woman, but he could plainly hear the confusion in her voice.

The Soul, or was he a Human? Jared could not be sure. Whatever he was, he did not immediately answer Madison. Instead, his bright blue eyes with their rings of silver looked Jared up and down. He was being appraised and evaluated and Jared returned the favor. The stranger had close-cropped dark hair crowning his square-jawed face. He was not as tall or broad shouldered as Kyle, but he was well built. His steps, in fact, every motion he made, appeared precise. Precise movements of someone ready for a threat at any moment.

"It's him," hissed Melanie as she glared at the man. "The one from Chicago… Williams."

Williams' easygoing smile seemed unconcerned about Melanie's reaction. With a casual shrug of his shoulders he replied, "Actually it's Craig."

He shifted his weight to one side so he could address Madison, but his eyes never left Jared or Melanie. "Melanie and I have crossed paths before. It wasn't a pleasant encounter for either one of us. As for the men, I don't know them. But I assume their friends of hers."

Madison said something in reply, but Jared was barely listening. When Mel had decided she was going to Chicago with Nate and the others, and more importantly without him, they had launched into a huge argument. Yelling and screaming at each other, they had fought bitterly and then loved fervently over her decision. Fuel to the fire. Two stubborn and very passionate lovers, as it had always been for them.

As usual, in the end, Melanie got her way. Jared would stay behind. For Jamie, but also for protection for their entire enclave. He had worried and fretted while she was gone. Certain he should not have given in and let her go.

She did return and faster than he had expected. But without Ian or Wanda. Melanie, with Nate and
Burns providing details, retold of their time in Chicago. Of evading the Seekers while looking for the Humans who made their home in the subterranean labyrinth beneath the city. Being found by Marc and his people and then gaining their trust. But their initial success had been quickly overshadowed by one shocking event after another.

Among the many horrors Melanie recounted, perhaps the worst was the man she knew only as Williams. A Soul, who had been carved up and weakened, until the original human mind had regained control. A man tortured by the death of his daughter and utterly enraged at the Souls. Jared knew his Mel was not someone easily intimated, but this Williams had frightened her.

Now the same man stood before them, smiling as if they were old friend reunited. He was speaking with Madison, questioning the woman about their current operation. About the need for keeping up appearances. It was readily apparent Williams was in charge here, his tone of voice one of skilled command. And his eyes had never left Jared or Melanie, focused upon them like a hawk eyeing its prey.

Jared felt a gnawing fear settle in the pit of his stomach. It had started when Sunny had gone missing and then one thing after another had gone wrong. The feeling of everything slowly, but surely, spinning out of control. And now this.

"If you'll excuse us," said Williams with a laid-back southern drawl to Jared, Melanie, and Kyle, "I need a little bit of privacy with Miss Madison here." He nodded his head towards the outside garage. "We won't take a minute, and then we can have a friendly chat."

Melanie sneered, "Oh, I'm so looking forward to it."

Madison looked at Melanie, who glared at Williams, and back to her commander, who wore a crooked little smile in response to Mel's anger. "Umm…of course," said Madison slowly, obviously confused over the exact nature of the two's past history.

Both exited the office, but they did not go far. Only a short distance from the garage and remained where it was easy to see them through the window in the office door. Madison put her back to them, but Williams's gaze unnervingly never left Jared or Mel. There was enough light spilling from the room to cause his eyes to glitter with a gleam of silver in the darkened garage.

From the couch, Kyle spoke up, his voice disbelieving. "That's the guy you told us about? One of those soldiers that attacked the Seekers in Chicago?"

"He is," confirmed Melanie. "And they did a lot more than just kill Seekers." Turning away from watching Williams and Madison speak, she whispered, "We need to get the hell out of here."

"That's not going to be easy," replied Jared. "They hauled us off so fast I don't know where they put my Jeep. I'm not even sure where they brought us."

Jared could feel the tension build in Melanie. The muscles in her back stiffen. With an angry hiss, she scolded, "We wouldn't be in this mess, Jared, if you hadn't run from the construction site."

"I thought they were Seekers!" he snapped back.

"No, it's worse than Seekers," countered Melanie, her voice rising. "If Williams is here, something bad is going to happen. Usually along the lines of a lot of death and destruction." She pushed away from him, her anger still growing. "Why did you run!? Seekers, Souls, or armed Humans, any way you put it, it was a dumb thing to do!"

His voice rose to a shout, "I panicked, alright!" Jared was angry as well, but a healthy portion was
directed at himself, not Melanie. "I saw the trap and I was sure it was for us...I just couldn't face losing anyone else. After Sunny...After Ian and Wanda..." He trailed off, unable to continue.

Melanie's face softened at his admission, "Oh, Jared..."

"Everything alright in here?"

Craig Williams stood alone in the doorway, Madison Brinsfield was nowhere to be seen. His genial smile was gone, replaced with a neutral mask of one who knew he was in control. The gun in his right hand, resting comfortably at his side, only reinforced that certainty.

The pit of dread in Jared center widened as his eyes focused on the weapon in Williams' hand. The man noticed his gaze and made a very mild shrug with his right hand. "I'd rather not use this. I think we can all be perfectly reasonable people here."

"What do you want?" Jared could hear the anger in Mel's words, but she forced her voice into a tightly controlled response.

"I'd like to think of this as an opportunity." Williams cocked his head to one side as if listening to an unheard voice. "Yes," he said agreeably to no one in particular, "We have an opportunity here that we didn't before." His focus remained on Melanie. "So is your little friend Wanda around? Or is it Wanderer? I've had a chance to read up on her from the Seekers' files. Put together with what I saw in Chicago got me thinking." A small smile returned to his face. "At one time you two were quite attached at the hip, weren't you? But now where is she? I'd like to speak with her."

Melanie was livid. "You nearly strangled her," she growled. "I'll never let you near Wanda again."

With a sigh, Williams' smile shrank away on his face. "Alright," he replied plainly as he regarded Mel's ire. "Let's just get this out of the way." He paused for another moment as if he was in the middle of an internal debate. "Back in Chicago, I was not in a good place. I'd just gotten my memory back and it was chop full of some of the most horrific things imaginable. As you can imagine, I didn't react well."

"All those people you killed...you and those people you work with." Mel's response was soft, but it was not direct in compassion towards Williams. Instead, it was from grief for his victims. "Between bombs, bullets, and disease, you've killed thousands."

The expression which slowly formed on the face of the man before them sent a shiver down Jared's spine. It was one of deep darkness. Those blue eyes with rings of silver seemed to now burn with a cold icy blue flame.

"I killed parasites. I killed the invaders of our world," answered Williams in a deadly calm voice. "I killed those maggots who put one of their miserable kind in my daughter." His tone grew mocking, "What have you done, Melanie, to save humanity? Other than become chummy pals with the very worm who once enslaved you."

But Melanie did not back down from Williams' taunts. "You did more than just kill Souls. Your people knew there were Humans in Chicago and you still went ahead and released the plague. You killed Tim, he was just a kid. All so you could get Marc's people to destroy themselves in retribution for them helping the Souls."

A low, long, sound came from Williams' throat. It could only be described as a growl. Animal like and angry. Shaking his head sadly at Melanie, he said, "You're going to be a real pain aren't you? You might actually go to the Souls to warn them."
Jared cleared his throat. Every instinct he had told him they needed to be very careful around this man. "Look," he said plainly, "all we want to do is leave. No one has to say anything to the Souls."

Eyeing Jared and then Kyle carefully, Williams replied gamely, "If it was just you two, I might consider letting you go. But Melanie here changes the equation. We can use her."

Jared was not sure which one of them said it first, but twin shouting answers of "The hell you are!" came from both Mel and himself.

But Williams gave an amused chuckle and tilted his head toward the office door. Through its window Jared saw Madison had returned with what had to be nearly two dozen men and women. Some were dressed like Seekers and others as construction workers. "You really don't have a choice in the matter," said Craig Williams. He began to turn and then stopped when he saw the shock on Jared's and the others' faces.

"Buck up," he said smoothly. "You're going to help me save the world."

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"So right now, it's talking to you?" asked Smith. His eyes were intense, fixated on Jodi and every move she made.

Jodi could feel the heat of embarrassment on her cheeks. Sunny's outburst had caused Smith to quickly isolate her. She was not sure what he had told Carol and the others. They had all gawked at her in open horror and immediately distanced themselves. As if her condition might be a disease and they would become infected if they breathed the same air.

Now she sat with Smith in a lavish room on the second floor. It was a large corner office reserved for what she guessed was hospital's administrator. A wide set of windows wrapped around the room's exterior wall. Providing a view of the bright sun-drenched buildings of the little city of Banning. Plush carpeting and comfortable chairs surrounded a large and ornate desk. It was Smith's office and the leader for the human rebels rested against the furniture with his arms crossed while he scrutinized her.

Telling herself none of this was her fault did not make Jodi feel any better. She had certainly not asked to be included in any of this insanity. No, she had wanted nothing more to finish college, start a job, and marry Kyle. None of that sounded like it was such an unreasonable demand out of life. And yet, here she was conscripted into the Human resistance. With an alien worm in her head who talked to her and very much wanted to be with her boyfriend.

'Sorry,' whimpered Sunny as the Soul felt her private lament.

'Way too late,' griped Jodi in reply. 'And don't ever try something like that again!'

Smith was still waiting for her to answer. His eyes narrowed ever so slightly at her hesitation. It must seem like she was trying to evade his question.

"Uh…Sorry," apologized Jodi. She was struggling to find a way to not dig the hole she was in even deeper. "Yeah," she said in a way of an answer, "I can hear her. Started last night." Looking down at her hands she added gloomily, "Sunny hadn't been able to do anything but talk until…earlier."

Smith's intense gaze softened. "Her? Sunny?" He asked, perplexed. Now he looked away and began to rummage through a file, an actual paper document, not his always present computer tablet.
After a minute, he returned to Jodi with his penetrating scrutiny. "According to the information we have, Sunlight Passing Through The Ice is not a Soul female. It has no gender."

The expression on Smith's face had become quizzical and she realized he really wanted to know if his data was correct. Jodi had no idea if it was or not. She had not given much thought to how the Souls reproduced. A few female members while the rest of their kind were genderless. The mothers sacrificing themselves for their offspring. It all seemed more than a little bleak to Jodi. Seeing as she needed to give Smith an answer, she quizzed Sunny for the information.

'I am not a potential mother,' came Sunny's stringent reply. Jodi found the response odd, she wondered why she had struck a nerve. Pressing a little deeper into Sunny's mind, she sought clarification. The answer surprised Jodi, apparently in the Souls' society asking or making the assumption about being a female was considered to be a bit rude.

'It is a great honor to be capable of motherhood,' supplied Sunny. 'But one does not ask on the subject unless the information is volunteered. It's a private issue.'

'Well…sorry,' offered Jodi. She was a little surprised she was apologizing to the alien. But her regret was supplanted by another thought. 'When we're talking you sound, well, like me.' It had not occurred till now that Sunny's voice in her head sounded just like her own voice.

'I'm in you, Jodi,' explained Sunny, 'and so I take on aspects of your body. Right now I'm a female.'

'So if you're put in a man you're male, just like that?'

Sunny laughed a little. It was not directed at Jodi, only at the innocence of her question. 'No, not just like that. Switching a body requires time to adjust. Depending on the species, going from one gender to another can be as difficult as changing to an entirely new race.'

"Interesting," intoned Smith. Jodi was startled out of her mental conversation with Sunny. He was still scrutinizing her carefully. "You're eyes shift down and to the left when you're in communication with the parasite."

"Huh?" asked a puzzled Jodi. Her confusion was rapidly building. She was finding his response odd. Smith seemed completely unconcerned to the news of Sunny's revival.

"People processing internal auditory information shift their eyes down and to the left," explained Smith as he began jotting down some notes. He noticed her continued confusion and clarified. "When people talk to themselves, which is essentially what you are doing, they focus their eyes on the lower left-hand side."

"I'm not imagining this," protested Jodi angrily. "I really wish I was, but I am hearing her…it…whatever." While Smith apparently was unworried about Sunny taking control, Jodi felt quite opposite. "What if she takes me over again?"

'I won't,' assured Sunny in her mind. 'I don't want to get us into more trouble.'

'Shhh,' whispered back Jodi, 'You don't even know how you did it.' Carrying on two conversations at once was becoming more than a little difficult.

Smith shook his head distractedly. "No, I don't doubt you, Jodi. I know it's real." He picked up his tablet computer and scanned over the text on its screen. "They said this might happen. Interactions with the neuron structure could produce unexpected results. Combined with new synaptic growth…" He started suddenly, realizing he was speaking out loud to her. Then he turned away, still muttering.
As his finger's tapped lightly across the tablet's screen, his voice sporadically became loud enough for Jodi to hear snippets of his whispering. "None of the test subjects…They had better correct this in the next batch…Too late to turn back…"

Jodi's eyes narrowed. Much of what Smith was saying made little sense to her. But it appeared someone knew what had happened to her was possible. Pausing, uncertainty tugging at Jodi, she finally decided to lay out to Smith everything she knew.

"Samantha told me about the CURE," said Jodi and Smith's attention swiftly refocused on her, but he said nothing. "Told me about how it changes us to make us immune to the Souls. Changes our DNA…our brains…Is this stuff really safe?"

Rubbing his eyes and then running his hand across his rough face, Smith let out a pained sigh. It had been several days since he shaved. Just as much time had gone by with little sleep, judging from the dark circles under his eyes. He pushed himself off the desk and took a seat in a chair nearest Jodi. Leaning back wearily, he began to speak, his words forlorn and depressed. "All I wanted in the beginning was a nice cushy government research job. Nothing fancy, just enough to have a decent living. Be a bit civic-minded while I was at it."

He looked out the wide windows running along the office wall. "Never in a million years," went on Smith, "would I believe I'd get caught up in government cover-ups, aliens, the fate of humanity, and all this insanity…" He trailed off with an agitated movement of his head.

"What?" began Jodi, but went no further when Smith turned away from the outside view and started talking again.

"It's been a long road to get here, Jodi. We've had to sacrifice so much. Years down in that pit. Thought I was going to go crazy. If Doctor Dobson hadn't made her breakthrough after cutting up so many of those little silvery bastards, it wouldn't have made a difference…" Smith trailed off again, his eyes distant, lost in old memories.

A spike of fear came from Sunny. She wailed in fright, 'They're going to take me out and chop me into pieces!'

Between Smith's erratic behavior and Sunny's terror at the idea of being dissected, a maddening headache was building in Jodi. She desperately wished someone else could be the voice of reason around here. Yet there was no one else. Needing to calm Sunny down before she tried to get the truth about the CURE from Smith, she focused on the creature who had stolen her life.

'Look,' stated Jodi sternly as Sunny trembled in the back of her mind, 'I'm not happy about what you did. I don't forgive you. But…'

Jodi trailed off, it was hard to place her feelings. How many times had she imagined the little silver worm called Sunlight Passing Through The Ice on the ground while she crushed it with the heel of her shoe? Not that long ago Jodi would have been pleased to do it. Yet it was much harder to consider when she could actually speak to Sunny. When the Soul apologized and had tried to undo the damage. As much as she might want to, she did not actually hate the alien living in her. At least not enough to see Sunny dead.

'...I won't let them cut you up. Okay?' decided Jodi. Echoing Sunny's earlier words she added, 'We can put you in a cryotank and send you somewhere safe.'

Jodi felt a wash of gratefulness come from the Soul and a note of caution. 'Thank you,' whispered Sunny, 'But Smith and the others might force you to give me up.'
Sunny's concern only helped to solidify Jodi's determination. 'I've had enough people use me and decided what to do with me without my permission. First you and the Souls, then Smith and his rebels. No one's doing anything to me unless I say so. And I say you're staying right here.'

"You're talking to it again," interrupted Smith as he stared at her from his narrow face. His previous melancholy appeared to be over. He was back to his old self, in command and ready to give orders.

Jodi, however, was far from being in the mood to be a good little soldier. Letting out an irritated sigh, she glared back at the man. "Yeah, I was," she sneered. "Sorry, but as I said, I really can't stop it. If you're done with your little trip down memory lane, I think it about time I got some answers."

"Do you now?" asked Smith.

"Putting it mildly, your wonder cure has got some flaws. But apparently you knew things could go wrong. Is it such a great idea to go running around using this stuff when you don't know the long-term results?"

Smith did not answer and Jodi felt her hands ball into fists in frustration. Pushing out of her chair, she stood over Smith. She was not nearly as big as he was, but Jodi was damn determined to stop him from just sitting there and avoiding her questions. "And what the hell is the plan? Are we going to keep grabbing a Soul or two at a time? We plan to live in this hospital the rest of our lives? I think the Souls will start to notice." She could plainly feel Sunny's concern for other Souls and her own curiosity was piqued. "What are we going to do with all the Souls?"

He eyed her warily. "Jodi, you don't need to worry about our plans. We've got the situation under control." Smith spoke like a stereotypical government official, carefully rehearsed lines delivered with the effect of placating a disconcerted citizen.

"The hell you do," growled Jodi, not letting Smith weasel his way out of an explanation. "You've got everyone running around, doing a million little tasks. Keeping everybody busy so they don't have time to think about how everything is so screwed up. I beginning to think you guys don't have a long-term plan."

An amused smile played on Smith's face. "Oh, I suppose you and Sunny have a better idea? Tell me, is the little parasite whispering in your ear about how it's sorry and it didn't mean to hurt anyone. That it only wanted to make the world a better place."

Smith's accurate assessment of Sunny derailed some of Jodi's hostility. And he must have been able to tell for his patronizing smile widened. "I've never had many conversations with them before, but I've heard all their usual lines. Ever so friendly and kind as drove us to the brink of extinction." His smile grew sour. "Everything they say is a load of garbage."

Jodi thought on Sunny's memories of Kyle, Ian, and all the other Humans in those grimy caves and the Souls who help them. Uncertain if she was actually defending Sunny or just pointing out the flaw in Smith's little speech, she replied, "But Sunny really is different. She and a few other Souls are helping other rebels Humans. These Souls think their kind are wrong. They're trying to help."

"Really?" asked Smith skeptically. "Where are these rebels?"

"Arizona," answered Jodi. She concentrated for a moment while going through Sunny's memories. "I'd need a map to figure it out. A cave system little way outside Tucson, I think. Sunny and another Soul have been living with them for some time."

"More pet Humans," grumbled Smith unhappily. "I suppose you think we should reach out to
them? Make some type of alliance with these traitorous Souls?"

Throwing her hands up in frustrated exasperation, Jodi sat down heavily in her chair. "I don't know, shouldn't we at least consider it? Isn't the fact some of the Souls changed their mind about us important?"

Leaning forward in his chair, Smith went silent while his face turned grave. "Alright, you want some answers, well let me explain." Closing his eyes, he exhaled a puff of air, a pause as he gathered his thoughts.

"First," began Smith as he opened his eyes and focused on Jodi. "I don't care if some of the Souls changed their minds about humanity. The people I work for don't care either." He pointed out the window to the world beyond. "Let's for the moment table the fact the vast majority of the parasites see us as nothing other than meat puppets. What, exactly, would we gain by allying ourselves with these turncoats? Will they take up arms against their own kind? Will they provide us with detailed information on their defenses? Help us retake the planet by any means necessary?"

Jodi did not even need to ask Sunny. She could plainly feel the idea of hurting anyone appalled the Soul. "But do we need to fight? Maybe we can reach…I don't know…some type of peace agreement."

But Smith just shook his head. "The conflict is inevitable, Jodi. The very nature of these creatures requires them to take a host body. Their population doesn't age and die off, so they have an ever expanding population. They will always need more bodies. Even if we did reach some form of coexistence with the parasites, we would be consigning millions if not billions of Humans to be hollowed out husks for the Souls to wear."

Smith's voice lowered, turning somber. "Would you sacrifice your parents to reach a peace agreement? Would you ask it of someone else?"

No matter how she looked at it, cooperation with the Souls meant giving up on their Human hosts. If you had a way to restore a person back to themselves, thought Jodi, how could you refuse? The cushions of the armchair were accepting as Jodi sagged into the chair, her anger deflating. "No, I wouldn't," she admitted.

"This is our world, Jodi," implored Smith. "We have every right to take it back." His voice rose, filling with conviction. "Right now we have an opportunity to strike a decisive blow on the parasites. We have to take it."

Smith hesitated and he let out a troubled breath. "But you are right about one thing, Jodi," he said. "The CURE does have some flaws. Some unforeseen side effects. We're working hard to correct the problems. And this is where you can help us."

Jodi was silent, digesting all of what Smith had said. "What would I need to do?"

"Just some tests," explained Smith judiciously. "So we can learn why Sunlight is awake and able to talk to you."

"Don't hurt Sunny," Jodi informed him curtly. As she eyed Smith cautiously, she added, "I promised her I wouldn't let you guys cut her up."

Smith gave a distracted shake of his head, seemingly amused by Jodi's defense of Sunny. "I mean it," insisted Jodi. "Nothing is to be done to Sunlight Passing Through The Ice."

"Alright, fine," replied Smith as he held up his hands in mock surrender to Jodi's terms.
Jodi crossed her arms and pursed her lips. She knew it looked a little childish, but she was not going to do anything for Smith until she had his promise and knew it was safe. "I'm not doing a damn thing until I know both of us are going to be okay."

Smith stood up and gave Jodi a tired smile. "Please," he said earnestly. "Let me show you. It's like the tests we ran before, but just a more in-depth scanning of your brain. You don't even have to go to sleep to do it. It's like getting an MRI scan."

Both Jodi and Sunny conferred to reach a decision. Sunny was still frightened by Smith, worried about his plans for open war with her people. Jodi did not relish the idea of war either, but she could not dismiss Smith's arguments. As much as she did not like the man, he was fighting to free humanity from the Souls. Jodi had to stand with her people. Reluctantly she stood as she promised the Soul in her head she would keep her safe.

"Excellent," smiled Smith and he walked briskly to the door. With a deep sigh of her own, Jodi followed after him.

They did not travel far. Unlike the busy first floor, the second floor of the hospital was nearly deserted. Jodi only saw a handful of people working in nearly empty offices. Soon they came to a wide hallway with a single metallic door, recessed into the side of the wall. The corridor was deserted except for two men guarding the entrance. Jodi had never seen either one before. They glanced at her and then Smith, but said nothing.

To one side of the doorway, a small card reader with a tiny red light gleamed patiently. A plaque identifying the room was mostly obscured by one of the guard's massive body. Jodi had to stretch around the mountain of the man to see it. She wondered what type of room needed two security guards and keycard access. When she managed to read it, Jodi frowned. "Private Conference Room?"

Smith shrugged evenly. "Critical equipment we brought with us is stored here," he explained. "Don't worry, we'll have this taken care of in no time."

Jodi eyed him suspiciously but ultimately decided to wait and see what was going to happen next. The Director busied himself with swiping a keycard over the adjacent security sensor. There was a beep from the panel followed by a clunk from the doorframe. A faint whoosh of air pushed out as Smith pulled on the door's handle and swung it open.

Stepping through after Smith, Jodi's lungs were assailed by cold, crisp air. The temperature had to be nearly freezing. A puff of steamy condensation emerged from both Jodi and Smith as they entered the room. There was an odd metallic quality to the air. Some sort of strong chemical cleaner guessed Jodi had been used recently.

Smith flicked a switch and the lights in the room came on. It was not a very large space. Precisely square white tiles covered the floor and the walls. To one side a row of cupboards hung from wall. Blank table tops sat underneath them. There was another door, a plain wooden one at the far end of the room. And at the center of it all was a single large rectangular table with a sink at one end. Made out of polished stainless steel it had a tapered top. It was an autopsy table. This must be the hospital's morgue, realized Jodi with an oddly sluggish thought. Why else would there be a body resting here?

"Damn it," growled Smith as he also saw the body on the table.

The body... Something was very wrong because Jodi's mind could not process what she was seeing. Samantha Greer lay unmoving on the table. But Samantha was out in the city. Smith had
said so. Yet Samantha's body was on the autopsy table. Her unseeing eyes staring unblinkingly at the ceiling.

"S-Sam?" said Jodi haltingly. She felt like someone had just punched her in the gut. She looked blankly at Smith and then back to the body. Samantha lay unclothed on the table, a single white sheet covering most of her body. Her dark hair spilled around her face, but a section near her right temple the hair had been shaved away. A thin scar lay across the exposed part of her skull.

"What…the…hell?" said Jodi weakly.

Smith was shaking his head distractedly as if Samantha's body presence was causing him pain. "I thought…we'd taken care of her by now."

Jodi started backing away from Smith. Her feet felt clumsy and uncoordinated as she tried to distance herself. "What did you do?" she demanded from Smith. Jodi felt like she was yelling, but in reality her words came out as a hoarse whisper.

"We didn't kill her," replied Smith with a defensive protest. He sagged against a nearby wall, exhausted. His eyes stared at the tiled floor of the room. "Samantha had an aneurysm last night. We attempted to stem the bleeding, but it was too late."

Managing to pull his gaze from the ground he met Jodi's eyes. "I'm sorry, I really am. I didn't mean for you to see this. I know she was your friend."

Jodi had backed up to the door. Behind her, she desperately groped for the handle, for she dared not take her eyes off of Smith. Pushing himself off the wall he took one step towards her and Jodi shouted, "You stay the hell away from me!"

"I'm sorry Jodi, but I've got orders," replied Smith stoically. Every bit of the man was resignedly committed to his plan. He took a step closer and said, "Don't fight this."

Her hand finally caught the door's handle. But before Jodi could do anything the door was pushed open from the outside. The two guards, both of them large enough they had to pass one at a time through the doorway, entered the room.

'We walked right into this. We practically gift wrapped ourselves,' moaned Sunny. Fear surged through both Human and Soul. At that moment, their panic united them and they broke into a frantic run, trying to avoid the three men. But their flight was all too short. The two giants, with strong hands, quickly grabbed hold of her by her arms. Jodi twisted and struggled but could not break free of their steel grip.

"Stop it!" snapped Smith as Jodi continued to fight. "Just do what's asked of you and you'll be fine."

"You bastard!" screamed Jodi.

Smith did not react to her shriek. He spun on his heel and began walking to the other door. Jodi was pulled along. They passed through and entered into a much larger and darker room. Jodi tried repeated to kick the two monsters holding her. She might as well been kicking two boulders for all the good it did. Her anger and fear surged together. Without any other options, Jodi was about to start screaming in the hopes someone would hear when the loud hiss and a crackle of a speaker turning on stopped her short.

"Is the subject here?" came a voice over the unseen speaker.

Jodi stopped struggling and peered into the dim gloom. The harsh metallic odor was stronger here.
There were more of the flat autopsy tables arrayed on the right side of the room. The lowered lights cast their polished surfaces as a dull silver. Most stood empty, but disturbingly a few had black body bags resting on them. To the left, a wide assortment of tubing ran into multiple black boxes laying across several tabletops. Faint red lights flickered on these bulky black cases while they quietly hummed. Some sort of dark liquid was being pumped through the pipelines between each container. It was laboratory equipment assumed Jodi, but it was unlike anything she had seen before.

There did not appear to be anyone else in the room, yet Smith answered with a yes to the empty air.

"Her status?"

The sound came from above and Jodi glanced up. There was a circular speaker in the ceiling, likely part of the hospital's announcement system. But the voice on the speaker was all wrong. It was distorted and machine-like.

"Beyond her briefly losing control of her voice, Jodi appears in possession of her body. But the parasite is in continual communication with her," reported Smith to the mysterious source of the strange voice.

Again words filtered out from the speaker in the ceiling. "Unacceptable. Bring her here." Jodi realized from the pitch and tone whoever was talking was using some sort of voice generator.

At once the grip from the two guards tightened on Jodi's arms. Again she thrashed and fought. But they were too large and she too small. With ease, they dragged her forward, deeper into the gloomy chamber.

"Don't do this!" she screamed as she twisted her head back to glare at Smith.

"Sorry, Jodi," offered Smith pathetically as he looked away and would not meet her eyes.

"Do not fear."

So enraged at Smith's betrayal it took Jodi a moment to realize the machine voice was speaking to her. The two guards had stopped hauling her forward. Now they just held her in place. Their faces, indeed their whole bodies, impassive as stone statues.

Jodi still saw no one else in this disturbing laboratory. "Who are you? Where are you?" she demanded.

"I will show you."

A blurry amber light flickered on at the end of the room. It was behind a series of medical privacy screens Jodi had previously not noticed. The screens were made of thin fabric stretched between metal frames, making a small temporary wall from the rest of the room. The glow from the lamp filtered through the material, providing only a little additional illumination to the murky laboratory. Someone was beginning to move behind the partition and they created ruddy patterns on the partially transparent walls.

But the shadows cast were bizarre. Strange and distorted from Jodi's viewpoint. Arms moved that were too long and thin to belong to a man. And then someone very tall and thin rose up behind the screens.

Her mouth opened and the chilly metallic smelling air was sucked in a startled gasp. Jodi wanted to scream, but nothing but a faint whimper made its way out of her throat. The thing before her
pushed the medical screens aside with a very casual move of its long, bony arms. It stepped forward on short, squat legs.

Large red-yellow eyes gazed down at her from a shriveled and sunken head. It's withered mouth moved and sounds of eerie hoots and clicks immerged. After a brief delay the robotic voice projected, "My appearance greatly disturbs you…"

'No, No! NO! NOOOO!' wailed Sunny in Jodi's mind. The Soul was in a blind terror as a primal and ancient fear possessed her. Vague and twisted memories welled up within the tiny silver being and surged into their shared mind. They were very old memories, passed down from one generation of Souls to the next. From a time of great torment and fear. It was almost incomprehensible to Jodi, but one word tied to the monstrosity before Jodi managed to make it through the torrent of primordial imagery – 'Vulture.'

More warbling noises came from the Vulture-thing and the overhead speaker again buzzed into life to deliver the translated words as it slouched towards Jodi. "…But I will not harm you."

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for taking so long. I had a nasty case of writers block on this chapter. Rewrote it several times before I got it to a point where I liked it. Thanks to everyone who helped me work through this tough chapter.
Reunion

"Pardon me, are you Bright Moon on Fallen Snow?"

Bright Moon had been staring at her computer screen for too long. She had to blink several times to refocus on the man who stood before her. He was on the short side, with a round shaped body. Not actually overweight, she estimated, but well rounded. His black hair neatly combed, and his Seeker's uniform immaculately pressed.

"Umm…yes," she said slowly. The body…her body, she corrected herself, still felt odd responding to her name. The lingering after effects of Seeker Sage of Tides.

The Seeker glanced around, a slight apprehension marring his stout face. Around the office Seekers were in the state of intense work. Quick typing on keyboards, dozens of continuing phones calls, an orderly operation of paperwork and preparation. Two key parts of the Seekers' calling. Except at Bright Moon's desk. There nothing was happening. No assigned tasks, no phone calls to make. Her security level revoked down to the most basic of access for her computer.

"My name is Owen," said the Seeker as he dragged an empty chair over to Bright Moon's desk. Giving one more worried look around, he sat down. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Bright Moon gave a slight shrug of her shoulders. "No, I was just…" She trailed off. She really had not been doing anything for the last two hours except to stare at her monitor and think. "…I'm not busy," she finally finished.

"Oh, well, good," replied Owen. "Seeker Bright Moon, I was hoping to ask you some questions."

Bright Moon tensed. She knew something like this would happen sooner or later. But she had anticipated the questions to come from her coworkers. Her peers, not a stranger. Since her return from the Healers, everyone in the office had pointedly ignored her.

Owen picked up on her discomfort. He crooned, "If you would rather not speak to me."

"No," she replied flatly, "ask your questions."

Now it was Owen who looked troubled. Leaning forward, he spoke in a near whisper, "You worked with Seeker Simple Sunlight…or more specifically the human named Rebecca Taylor."

His inquiry was not what she had expected. Bright Moon was prepared for questions about her betrayal, how could she forsake her own people, why had she sided with the humans, not for this. Simple Sunlight, someone she once thought of as a friend. With sunny smiles and her carefree attitude towards life. A Soul so unlike herself. But it was all just a mask, covering a very violent and angry Rebecca Taylor. Bright Moon let out a breath she did not realize she was holding. "What do you want to know?"

With his head bowed, as if he was ashamed, he answered. "I too, worked with one of the counterfeits. He was Seeker Gray Dawns or was. His host was called Carl Jenner."

"Oh," began Bright Moon, but became uncertain of what to say.

"We worked together for the better part of a year. By all appearances, he was a diligent and competent Seeker." Owen speech grew troubled and he seemed to sag further in his chair. "We
were…friends. I never even suspected…"

Bright Moon now understood. Owen had sought her out, someone else who was fooled by the clandestine agents of the Facility. "I'm very sorry, Owen," said Bright Moon sympathetically. "It's must be very painful."

"It is," admitted Owen as he stared at his clasped hands in his lap. "I've tried reconciling my feelings of friendship with the man I thought was Grey Dawns and his real identity. Logically I can see he would befriend me to learn more about our organization and potentially manipulate me. But so much of our time outside work had little to do with activities as Seekers. There was little for him learn from me that his position did not already allow him. Nor did he ever ask me to do anything I was uncomfortable with."

Owen now looked up and gazed steadily at Bright Moon. "Was it the same for you?"

His question brought an unexpected tug of discomfort to Bright Moon. Feelings of betrayal mixed with moments of horror as she recalled the night the Simple Sunlight disguise fell away and then Rebecca Taylor's grisly end.

"No," she answered after a minute of contemplation. "It was different. We were colleges at first. She was friendly with everyone, but ultimately did little to stand out in any way. I suppose that was deliberate on her part. Only after the outbreak did she approach me and begin to develop a friendship."

"And it was at this point she tried to manipulate you?"

Nodding, Bright Moon started, "I was in a difficult…place." More painful memories. Watching her people suffer and die from the plague, holding Calm Water Below's hand as he passed, and salvation from the most unlikely of sources. She started again, "I was recovering, and she took advantage. Looking back, I can see she worked to maneuver me away from an investigation that would have revealed the coming terrorist attack."

Owen's face was inscrutable. "Do you think she wanted to betray you?"

"I think…" and Bright Moon worked to suppress a shudder. "…she hated me. She despised all of us. And I think, perhaps most of all, she hated what she had become…a killer."

"I can understand she would hate us. But why would she hate herself?" replied Owen with a confused frown.

"I can't say she did hate herself with certainty. However, it was pointed out to me her dual life would cause her immense stress. Being pulled in two different directions. Also, the possibly of what was done to Rebecca to allow her to regain control left damaging physiological scars."

"I had wondered about how it must have been for Carl, to live in such a way. Such a painful existence." He paused and puzzlement formed in his eyes. "My Comforter told me I should not trouble myself with such concerns. What did yours say?"

A hint of a blush tinted Bright Moon's cheeks. "I, umm, had some rather unconventional comforters."

Owen's bewilderment grew on his face and then stopped abruptly. His eyes narrowed. "You mean the Humans."

"Yes," admitted Bright Moon softly. She watched and gauged Owen's reaction. A guarded look
mixed with confusion and a touch of trepidation crossed the Seeker's face. He shifted his body away from her. It was subtle movement, but his response was clear. Owen was distancing himself from her. Bright Moon cast her eyes down, dejected.

With gaze to the floor, she heard Owen speak. "I…don't understand. I have heard other speak of your betrayal. How you forsook your calling. Rumors of manipulation or trauma from our recent losses were causing your behavior. I thought perhaps it stemmed from actions of Rebecca Taylor. How can you side with the people who were trying to kill you?"

Bright Moon sighed. During her absence, many rumors had cropped up about why she had misled the Seekers. Since her return to her body no one, except for Owen, had wanted to hear her side of the story. She looked up to meet Owen's apprehensive eyes. "Because as much as Rebecca Taylor was trying to kill me, another Human saved me."

"Marc Walters," speculated Owen accurately. "He saved you?"

"Yes," nodded Bright Moon. "Taylor had a gun pointed at my head, threatening to kill me. Marc had escaped. Rationally he should have run, but he…came back for me. We both were captured and brought before the leader of the attacking humans. Marc fought him. Their fight was…brutal. At one point, Marc lay on the ground injured. I ran to protect him; I couldn't bare of the idea of him hurt."

"It's true then," said Owen. He was staring at her with a look of open amazement. "You have become…partnered with Marc?"

A nervous little smile started on Bright Moon's face. "I'm not sure exactly what we are." She could feel the blush spread. "The Seeker who fell in love with a Human. It makes things a bit complicated."

Owen studied her, his expression impossible to read. After a while, he shook his head. "I have met Marc Walters. I do not know what to make of him. He was friendly one moment and then attacked me the next. All in some attempt to protect a newborn. I don't know what he hoped to accomplish."

Bright Moon slowly nodded. It was a strange sensation to recall the memories of Sage of Tides' time in her body. The supervising Seeker had not been pleased when appraised of Marc's diversion allowing Dry Sands on the Plains to take Sarah's baby. To Sage, it was an another reminder of the dangers of the scheming Humans even as Wanderer pleaded for a peaceful resolution. Feelings of uncertainty and distrust from Sage over the events conflicted with her concern for Marc and the unpleasant emotions that came whenever she saw Marc with Dry Sands.

She was silent in contemplation of the past week and after a while she saw Owen was patiently waiting, hoping for some insight. And Bright Moon realized she did understand Marc's actions. "He had nothing to lose, only to gain," she said.

Owen's eyebrows sprung up at her explanation. "What does that mean?"

"Something Marc told me once – 'Beware the man who has nothing to lose, for he has only to gain.' At the time I thought it meant he would become dangerous, go down fighting. But to Marc the saying has a different meaning. To him it signifies to do the unexpected, to be bold and take a risk."

"Hmm," mused Owen as he rubbed his chin with the palm of his hand. "I think I may never understand Humans," he said with a sigh. He eyed her, perhaps more than a little suspiciously, and said, "But I believe you do. It is unfortunate you do not use these skills to help us."
Bright Moon felt an uneasy weight settle on her by Owen's comment. She dropped her head, her eyes cast down unhappily. "Not all Humans must be our enemy. Even now we are reaching an agreement with Marc's people."

"There is much skepticism among us Seekers about the possibility of there being any lasting peace," replied Owen. "While Sage of Tides is willing to make an attempt, many precautions are being put in place. The Humans will no longer be able to run amok." He shook his head. "You should have endeavored to deliver the Humans to us. Then we could have arrived at a peaceful resolution without the needless chaos of the last week."

At Owen's assertion Bright Moon felt a blossoming of shame and regret. However, she was not sure where her surge of emotion should be directed. Owen saw the Humans as a threat and only thought of solutions to contain the threat, never thinking of trying another approach. Would her people always be so rigid in their thinking? Or was she irritated with herself? Caught up in events that were far larger than herself while her promise to protect Marc's people had forced her to betray the Seekers over and over.

With a strained sigh, she responded. "Owen, I know you see me as a traitor. But I believed what I was doing was right. I protect those who can't protect themselves. And I can no longer see the logic of protecting one race by eliminating another. I wish to protect all people." She glanced around the room, looking to see if anyone was following their conversation and added, "I'm very sorry if I hurt anyone." But no one was listening. Everyone's focus was elsewhere, deliberately ignoring her.

Owen raised out of his chair. He seemed to be in deep thought. Perhaps he was considering her reasoning. "Well," he began a bit uncomfortably. He checked his watch and nodded politely. "Thank you for your time, Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. I must be going."

Wordlessly Bright Moon watched Owen leave. She looked at her computer monitor and the indicated time. It was not the end of her assigned shift, but there seemed to be little point in remaining.

###

"...How do you like me now, Now that I'm on my way? Do you still think I'm crazy Standin here today?"

To Wanda's ears, listing to the music was not easy. It was a loud, continuous thrumming beat coming from the stereo at the end of the hall. A rapid rising and falling of notes to the tune, a sizeable shift from the soft melodies her people generally played. Additionally, the sound system's volume was also turned all the way up, causing the song to be more than a little jarring. Done partly in an act of defiance and partly in celebration.

Stationed at every point of entrance into the Hotel Rose, the Seekers served as guards to the recently released Humans. Playing the music had become a passive-aggressive move directed at their wardens. A statement that if the Seekers were going to watch the Humans, they were going to have to put up with their music.

But in truth, Wanda knew the impudence towards the Seekers stood a distant second with her adoptive family in Chicago. They were in a festive mood. Released from their captivity, and returned to their home in the hotel. Since hiding their existence was no longer a concern, the Humans were enjoying making as much noise as they wanted. A happy, joyful laughter spread through the adjoining rooms of the hotel as the party showed no signs of slowing down. In a
nearby doorway, Greg and Nancy swayed together, while others nodded in time with the song. An aroma of something warm and spicy filter through the air, indication Dell was hard at work in preparation for dinner.

And Wanda did not care if the Humans decided to play every obnoxious tune they had to the wee hours of the morning. Ian was by her side. Awake and whole. They sat together in one the recently renovated hotel rooms on the second floor. Nearby Scott leaned against the door frame while they all waited for dinner.

"I guess we're putting the Dashing Songs' hotel out of business," speculated Ian. His arm wrapped around Wanda's waist and held her close. She snuggled against him, very content at his touch.

"Technically the hotel has been reclassified as a Healing Center," explained Scott. "Part of the amnesty deal Long Rivers managed to work out with the Seekers. The Healers will administer the building while the Seekers provide security for," and Scott stopped and raised his hands to provide a set of air quotes and said, "Abnormal Individuals."

Ian momentarily pondered the explanation and then smirked. "So basically you're saying this is the Souls' idea of a psych ward."

"With the inmates running the asylum," agreed Scott with an amused nod of his head.

"It's not like that," pouted Wanda. "The situation is…well, we Souls have never dealt with this before. The Seekers wish to reassure the populace they are still safe. Right now things are being handled delicately. Having this building reclassified as a healing site allows…"

Wanda trailed off as both Scott and Ian traded unconvinced and jaded glances. Even she could not spin the situation into a positive light. A prison where the Humans had ample space, comfortable beds, and a measure of independence while they remained within its walls, was still a prison.

She felt Ian gently squeeze her hand. Returning the caress, she said with a sigh, "I know it's not ideal. Give it time, please? Let my people get used to the idea."

Scott held up a hand as if warding away any possibility of dampening the mood. "No worries Wanda. Believe me, this is far better than our original fate."

Joining the quaking music, a commotion came from the outside hallway and brought a halt to their conversation. The noise was quickly revealed to be Simon. The doctor marched down the passageway, yelling over his shoulder, "Turn that damn racket off, can't hear myself think!"

Close behind him came Annie and Long Rivers, followed by Marc and Dry Sands on Plain. Simon did not stop and quickly disappeared out of sight. The sound of a door slamming shut soon followed.

Annie turned back to the others, her face wrinkled dejectedly. "I'll talk…" she started with her voice raised loud enough to cut through the drumming beat when the music abruptly cut off. Taking a moment to compose herself she began again, this time speaking at a normal volume. "I'll calm Simon down. He needs some time…I think he blames himself."

"I understand how Simon feels," spoke Long Rivers in his gentle tenor. "He is disturbed and angered. He saw to Mia's health for a long time and wishes to help." The Healer shook his head. "But there are no easy answers."

"I know," said Annie as she lightly patted Long Rivers' arm.
"What's going on?" asked Ian as Annie followed after her husband. "What's got Simon all riled up?"

"The day happened to end with the letter 'Y,'" responded Marc dryly as he moved past Scott and entered the room. He looked Ian up and down. "How are you doing?"

"Like I've been asleep for a week," admitted Ian. Rubbing the back of his neck, he added, "My skin still feels a little prickly, but otherwise I'm doing fine."

"Good," replied Marc absently. He let out a tired groan and unceremoniously dropped onto the bed next to Wanda and Ian. "Feels like I could sleep a month. At least a few things are going right today."

Wanda glanced at Marc and then turned to Long Rivers. "Has something happened with Mia?"

"She is, at least physically, fine," reported the Healer. "But her personality seems to be shifting almost continually."

Wanda felt Ian lean forward with interest. He looked at her, his eyes lidded with disbelief. "You were telling me what happened with Mia. How the Soul is wired into her brain. What about her personality?"

Long Rivers nodded gravely as he launched into an explanation. "There appears to be four distinct identities emerging in Mia. There is the Mia you know, a rather rebellious young Human teenager. But now there is an identity that corresponds to her pre-inserted life, a child. Then Mia the Soul."

Dry Sands spoke up, her voice raised just above a whisper. "Both of whom are frightened and confused. She wants her family and doesn't understand they are…gone." She said the last word as she fought to keep her speech steady.

From the bed, Marc cleared his throat with a cough. "Then there is Mia, and well…the best way I can describe it, is a personality which is a sum of all the others. A unified consciousness, I guess."

"And that was who we spoke to with you and Seeker Jade and Sage," said Scott to Wanda. More for Ian than anyone else he added, "It's hard to explain, but it's like her human half and soul half are in sync or something."

Ian shook his head. "Crazy," he remarked as he tried to make sense of the seemingly impossible. "So why did this happen? Why now? Mia was never like this before."

"I believe recent events have provided more than enough stress for Mia to help bring this on," answered Long Rivers. "It is also possible something in the hospital jogged her memory. While the Facility held her she seems to have been in some medical research center."

Marc pushed himself off the bed. "Let's not go down this path right now," he said with a tired sigh. "I've got that Seeker Jade regularly hounding Mia for more details about her captivity." Hunching his shoulders, he grumbled unhappily, "Taking a monumental effort for me to not drop kick her prissy little ass out a window."

Wanda rose gracefully off the bed, her hand still entwined with Ian's. "Yes, let's not discuss unpleasant topics. I believe we have a much happier occasion to celebrate."

"Too true," acknowledged Scott. "Not every day we have a christening."

The second floor, unlike the ruined third of the Hotel Rose, lacked a dining room and kitchen. But
the motley population of Humans had done their best to adapt. Hand in hand, Wanda and Ian made their way down the hallway to where Dell had cobbled together a few pots and pans to produce a workable meal. Marc and the others following right behind them.

A nearby room was serving as the makeshift dining hall. It was far too small to fit everyone, and people spilled out into the corridor. All of them hoping to see the newest addition to their little group. A few people parted and Wanda managed to squeeze past Jason to see Sarah sitting on the bed. Encircled by friends and family, she carefully held a little bundle in her arms. Little Tim was swaddled in a brand new blue blanket as his dark sleepy eyes blinked slowly at the gathered group of well-wishers.

Feeling a tug on her arm, Wanda turned to see his sister Alexis. Bouncing from one foot to another, the little girl looked up and gushed, "I have a baby brother."

"I know," replied Wanda with a happy smile.

Alexis pinched her nose and complained in a nasal voice, "He has stinky diapers."

Kate approached and tousled the girl's blonde locks. "You had stinky diapers at one time too, runt. I used to help change them."

Wanda laughed, this felt so right. Behind her, she could hear Ian talking with Jason and Marc. A snort and chuckle came from the men. Maneuvering around in the tight space, Wanda saw Annie had coaxed Simon back out of their room. Even the ill-tempered doctor had a smile on his face. The joy of this evening was becoming infectious.

From her spot on the bed, Sarah recognized Dry Sands on the Plain. The young Soul woman stood near Marc, with a nervous little smile on face. "Dry Sands," called Sarah, "come here."

Several people moved out of the way and Dry Sands took a step closer to Sarah and her looked around the room uncertainly. Sarah patted an open spot next to her on the bed with an open smile. "Com'on, someone wants to see you."

Dry Sands gulped and meekly moved over to the bed. Her whole body had begun to emanate dread. Baffled, Wanda wondered why Dry Sands was suddenly so afraid. Sitting down awkwardly, a rush of words came from the nervous Soul. "I'm very, very sorry I took him. I didn't mean…"

"Oh hush," interrupted Sarah. "I'm not mad. Marc explained what you did. How it was your idea to rescue Tim. I'm glad you did it."

Dry Sands' cheeks shaded a deep pink color. "I knew the Seekers wouldn't hurt me. And if I were holding little Tim, then they couldn't hurt him either."

Giving his wife a gentle squeeze and smiling down at his son, Mike said, "Sounds like something Marc would come up with."

Managing to make his way over to Sarah and Dry Sands, Marc gave an aw-shucks shrug of his shoulders. "I couldn't pass the idea up when Dry Sands told me."

Dry Sands smiled self-consciously. "I didn't think really my plan through. I wasn't sure what would happen. Just if I could keep him safe for at least a little while. When the Seekers did find Tim and me, they kept asking me to return him and I would say no. They ended up just starting at me, not knowing what to do."

A laugh came from Marc as he smiled warmly at both Tim and the Soul woman. "Marc Walters
strategy 101- confuse your enemy until they give up and leave you alone." He was about to say more when suddenly straightened, his eyes widening in amazement.

Wanda and several other turned to see what had caused Marc's reaction. Standing in the doorway was a very familiar face. Her blonde hair was pulled back in its usual ponytail. Dressed in the standard dark pants all Seekers wore, but she did not wear a holster for a sidearm, nor did she have the Seeker's suit jacket. Instead just a simple and unadorned white shirt. Her blue eyes with their sheen of silver tracked over everyone in the room and finally centered on Marc.

The room quieted to just quiet whispers. Marc stared at the woman for a long moment and then stepped closer. "Bright Moon?" he questioned.

Her lips twitched. Not really as a smile, more in surprise. "You know it's me?" she said in soft wonder.

Equally surprised, Marc replied, "I-I do." He took another step closer and said, "When did you get, umm, back in your body?"

"This afternoon, the Healers reinserted me. I had the usual exams and then assigned to desk work," explained Bright Moon. Her voice seemed caught in a near whisper. She asked Marc, "Is there… well…someplace…we can talk?" Glancing apprehensively around the room, she added, "Privately?"

"Yeah, uh, sure," answered Marc, his words stumbling out. This elicited several snarky comments from some of the men and a catcall or two. Marc swiveled and silence them all with a glare.

Without another word Bright Moon turned from the entrance and disappeared into the hallway beyond. Marc was quick through the doorway after her. Wanda managed to catch a brief glimpse of them striding down the corridor before the disappeared around a corner.

"Well today's full of reunions," said Scott with a shake of his head.

Abruptly Dry Sands on the Plain stood up. "Uh, thank you, Sarah. I-I s-should be going…" She stepped forward and she seemed terribly unsteady.

With her small size, Wanda barely managed to sidestep Ian and Scott to reach the young woman. "Dry Sands, please."

"Wanderer, I'm f-fine," sniffed the Soul as she pressed forward to exit the room.

Ian came up to her, along with Scott, Jason, and Mike. "What was all that about?" he asked as Dry Sands departed.

Wanda turned to Ian and the others. They all looked at her blankly for some explanation. Her head twisted back and forth hard enough to send her golden curls swishing around her head. Incredulous, she enquired, "Is this a human thing or a male thing? Because it's terribly obvious to me."

Sarah spoke up from the bed, her voice filled with a patient exasperation. "Oh, it's a male thing, honey. They're always the last to figure it out. And Marc didn't handle it particularly well."

"What?" demanded Scott.

"Dry Sands likes Marc," intoned Wanda as if she was speaking to a child. She paused in thought and then added, "Although I'm not sure if it's just infatuation or something more. I need to go after her."
Ian made some sort of protest. A half-hearted attempt at defending his gender but was overridden by Sarah. "Stowe it, O'Shea. Men are as dense as lead when it comes to a woman's heart." She carefully handed off a sleeping Tim to a bewildered Mike. "Take care of your son. I'll be back in a bit," instructed Sarah. To Wanda she then said, "Com'on, let's find Dry Sands.

"Thank you, Sarah," said Wanda, glad for the other woman's company. "We girls do need to stick together."

###

Long ago the roof of the Hotel Rose had been sealed with thick black tar and then covered in bleached-white crushed stones. Over time, the tar had lost its adhesive qualities, and most of the pebbles had washed away. Now only a dull blackish top with a scattering of gravel on the surface remained. With the sun already well below the horizon the lights of the city reflected dully off the old roof. Most of the buildings surrounding the old hotel were newer and taller. Lost among the throng of high-rises, the ramshackle roof of the hotel was an easy place to ignore.

With a loud creak the door to the roof swung open. First Marc and then Bright Moon walked out. They had gone up the rickety and antiquated elevator in silence. But now, truly alone and on the very top of the building, each turned to the other.

"Are you alright?" they both asked at the same time.

Marc let out a slight snort of amusement at their synchronized inquiries. "I'm fine," he assured her. Bright Moon said nothing in reply and as they stood next to each other, an uncertainty grew between them. Feeling awkward Marc reached out for Bright Moon but then hesitated as he saw her stiffen.

"Uhh, sorry," mumbled Marc as he tried to make sense of Bright Moon's anxiety.

"No, umm, I should…" stammered Bright Moon. She stopped and closed her eyes, a look of pure frustration branching across her face. "I'm so sorry you had to go through this Marc." Blinking her eyes open she shook her head sadly. "I remember all that happened, but it's not me. This is so disturbing…I don't…"

Marc came to the conclusion there were no appropriate words in the English language to convey the kaleidoscope of emotions both Bright Moon and he were feeling. He tried for something simpler. Reaching out to Bright Moon he closed the distance and pulled her into a tight embrace. He could feel the tension in her body. Lowering his head to her shoulder, he whispered in her ear, "It's okay."

She shifted in his arms and Marc began to feel the stiff muscles in her body begin to relax. Letting out a soft sigh, Bright Moon let her head rest on his shoulder. Smelling her hair, he inhaled deeply savoring, what he guessed, was vanilla scented shampoo. They remained this way for a long minute. A brief reprise from the weight of the world.

"You know, this should be confusing for you," murmured Bright Moon into Marc's shirt. "I mean it's confusing for me and I'm used to the idea of switching bodies."

Marc slowly ran the palm of his hand over her back. He rubbed a tight spot on her shoulder blade absently as he answered, "I've had more time to process it. You've been asleep, this must have all come as a big surprise when you woke up."
"It was," she replied. Her voice hitched as she continued, "I wasn't sure I would ever see you again."

"Me too," he admitted and his words were thick in his throat.

After a while Marc pulled back and let out one of his playful grins. "But you are here. And more importantly you did it! You saved us!"

"I didn't do anything," countered Bright Moon. "I was put in a Cryotank while it was debated if I should be sent off world or stick me in another host." Bright Moon swallowed trying to get a handle on her emotional rollercoaster. "Since my return, I've been…ostracized by the other Seekers. They feel I betrayed them."

"I'm sorry," said Marc as he held her close. "I put you into this situation."

"You didn't force or trick me into it. I volunteered to help. I have only myself to blame."

"Don't beat yourself up too much," argued Marc. "You really did save us. You got Sage of Tides in your body. Made Sage hesitate and rethink things. Bought us enough time for Wanda to pull off her little uprising with the Healers."

He was smiling as he said this, but his grin vanished when he saw the look on Bright Moon's face. Pain rippled across her blue eyes, the underlying silver seemed to sink away. "Sage did not inhabit my body Marc, not my real one." Looking down at her hands she studied them critically, curling her fingers open and closed. "We need to talk about this," she said sadly.

He remembered one of his earliest conversations with Sage of Tides when the Seeker wore Bright Moon's host body. How that body was no more Bright Moon on Fallen Snow than his clothes were Marc Walters. Bright Moon's true nature was always there, right before him. The human body was just an extension of the parasitical aliens. Marc had done his best to put it off. But he could not avoid reality forever.

He let go of Bright Moon and crossed over to the edge of the roof. Looking out over the city, he waited calmly until she came beside him. "It's not that I don't understand or ignore what you are, Bright Moon. Just with you and also Autumn Gusting Wind I tried to look past it. I tried not to see you as a parasite or a body snatcher."

"I suppose you do," pondered Bright Moon. "Down stairs you saw it was me right away, not Sage of Tides." She lowered herself down to sit on the dried-out old tar roof. Staring out into the distant lights of the city, she said, "But I am a parasite, Marc. Nothing changes that."

Beyond the distant sound of traffic from streets below, silence settled over them. Then Marc asked the question he had avoided but knew was inevitable. "What was her name?"

After a pause, Bright Moon answered, "Julia."

"Is she…in there…with you?"

"No," replied Bright Moon with a quick shake of her head. "She faded swiftly after my insertion."

"Because when I was talking with Sage every so often it felt like I was talking to you. I wasn't sure if it was Sage trying to manipulate me, if it was a memory of yours affecting Sage, or maybe your host." He sat down beside her, folding his long legs beneath him. "I'm not even sure I know what I'm talking about."
"I don't know," said Bright Moon with a helpless shrug of her shoulders. "I never thought I was being affected by my human body. I always assumed I was in control. But maybe some part of her continues on."

Marc turned away from the glow of the neon lights to face Bright Moon directly. "What was she like?"

Bright Moon drew her knees in and wrapped her arms around them. To Marc she looked cold and alone. He wanted to hold her, but instinctively knew she need to do this unaided. Her confession belonged only to her.

"Julia went to New York City from Akron, Ohio to study art history. After two semesters, she dropped out. Julia painted a bit, but mostly she made a living as a waitress. When our invasion began in earnest, she hid with many others in the subways and the countless underground tunnels in that city. We Seekers knew they were hiding there and we made many raids."

"Is that when she was captured?" asked Marc.

Shaking her head, she answered. "No, she and a few others made it for quite some time. They hid in the very deepest part of tunnels. Far from the surface."

Marc was surprised by this revelation. "Julia was like us? They built themselves a little underground home?"

"Not the same, Marc," came Bright Moon's dejected reply. "They were never close to being as successful as you. Just a handful of them, barely surviving. They had very little to eat, and the conditions she lived in were quite unhealthy. But they hung on for over three years." Her eyes were closed now, pulled into her host's memories. "Out of desperation she came up from her hidden underground home looking for food. That's when we...captured her."

She straightened up and let out a shaky little sigh. "She has in poor health, badly malnourished. But it wasn't hard for the Healers to correct the problems. When she was better...I was put into her. My first task as a Seeker was to locate Julia's friends."

Faintly Bright Moon went on. "I think in the beginning Julia tried to keep the locations of their hiding spots from me. I remember having difficulty recalling certain details. But it was not like she was aware in my mind. And eventually...she gave up...she was so tired of running. Then I used everything she knew to hunt them all down. We captured some, others went down fighting. When it was all over, she was...gone for good."

Marc let out his own unsteady breath. It was a story he had heard and even seen happen many times before. The capture of one person would inevitably lead the Seekers to other Humans in hiding. But it was the first time he had heard from the Seekers' perspective. "I figured it had to be something like that. Guess it makes sense why you were so good at tracking us in our tunnels."

Bright Moon sniffed and Marc could see the tears in her eyes. He scooted closer and attempted to put his arm around her, but she cringed away. Her voice was full of anguish, "Don't you hate me?"

"Of course I don't like what you did," stated Marc firmly. "But you feel sorry you did it, right?"

"I do now, but..." She looked up into the empty sky helplessly and a few swollen tears came rolling down her face. "But at the time I didn't think I did anything wrong. The idea humans could be living in such squalor was appalling to the other Seekers and me. I thought I was...helping."

"So you came here, learned a thing or two about Humans, realized you were wrong, and tried to
make amends. I can't hate you for that."

Now she was truly crying. "Marc," wept Bright Moon, "You can't just wave this way. I hunted your kind down..." She sucked in several deep breaths and managed to regain some composure. "I-I like being with you...You frustrate me, irate me, but at the same time you are so caring and tender with me. But I'm so scared what I am and what I've done will always come between us."

"Listen to me, Bright Moon," ordered Marc. He jabbed his finger into the stiff black roof. "Plenty of the people here have pasts they regret. More than enough of us have done things we're not proud of. Your welcome to join the club."

"Marc, it's not the same thing," lamented Bright Moon. "What I did..."

"Dell was a gangbanger and a drug dealer," interrupted Marc harshly. "Didn't have problems selling to kids. When she was younger, Kate stole from little old ladies when she cleaned their apartments. Jason used to help me boost cars and take them to chop shops. And I..." Marc let out an angry breath before he went on. "Was young and furious at the world. I did not have a problem taking or doing what I wanted. And I didn't care who I hurt."

"I remember," said Bright Moon hesitantly. "As Christopher Walters you had a criminal record."

With an unkind smile, Marc said, "That's the stuff they caught me doing. As I got older, I got smarter, less reckless. Didn't mean I wasn't still stealing or hurting people."

Bright Moon was silent, considering Marc's argument. Finally, she said, "But you changed."

"Alien invasions have a way of causing you to reprioritize your life," replied Marc with a slight grin. Softly he added, "Also there was a Soul who was kind to me. Sheltered me and a few others."

"Autumn Gusting Wind," whispered Bright Moon.

Marc nodded. "And through my...Adoptive mother...I learned about you Souls. I learned who you are and what you do." He reclined back and balanced himself with his hands. "I don't agree with what you've done on Earth. And I doubt I would on your other worlds either. But it doesn't mean I can't forgive you."

She shifted closer to Marc. Ducting her head timidly, she asked, "You would forgive me? Even after what you've learned?"

He leaned into her. "That's part of the deal with living on this planet. You screw up, ask for forgiveness, and then try to fix it."

"Not all Humans believe that," argued Bright Moon.

"Not all Seekers have asked," countered Marc.

Slowly Bright Moon put her arms around him. Marc tipped his head down until he gently rested his forehead on hers. "Marc, I am sorry for what I've done, not just to your people but to all Humans. Will you forgive me?"

"Of course," he whispered. Then their lips met and there was nothing more for either one to say.
Sitting in his chair with his hands shackled to the table, Steve Anderson glared at the man sitting across from him. "So Marc," sneered the younger man, "what's the going rate for betraying humanity? Didn't Judas get thirty pieces of silver? What'd you manage?"

Marc did not react. Sitting calmly, he had endured Steve's ranting insults since the man had been lead into the room by the Seekers. He waited patiently for the former agent of the Facility to calm down.

Steve's rage, however, was far from subsiding. Tilted his head back, he yelled towards the ceiling. "So this is what you assholes have come to!? You're outsourcing my torture!"

Overhead the cameras and other arrays of recording devices did not react to the man's outburst. There was no one else in the room and Steve was hoping to get some type of reaction. Sage of Tides and who knew how many Seekers were just outside, listening and watching everything. But Marc knew none of them would respond unless it were absolutely necessary.

Lowering his head back, Steve returned his scornful gaze to Marc. "You should have seen them try…got a couple big Seekers to hold me down. Did the whole waterboarding thing on me." He glanced away and it was clear to Marc that despite the man's bluster, he had been frightened by the Seeker's attempt at torture.

To his credit, Steve soon managed to get the horrors of his experience under control and continued his tirade. "Their Healers kept interrupting…worried I was going to be hurt. It would have been funny if it wasn't so pathetic."

Sage of Tides had given Marc access to their information on Steve Anderson. And Marc was fairly certain the Seeker was playing straight with him. They had held nothing back. Records indicated Steve Anderson was eighteen years old and originally from Detroit. He had, up until a year ago, been hiding out with a small group in the South Dakota Badlands. During a raid Steve had been captured and a Seeker had been quickly inserted. The Seeker took the next few days to dig through Steve's memories to locate the other humans. But then something unexpected happened. He vanished one night from his apartment. An exhaustive search had turned up nothing and eventually the Seekers presumed Steve had managed to wrestle control and perish out in the wildernesses. However, Steve was very much alive and showed up months later in Chicago. With a neutered Soul in his head and armed to the teeth with four other agents.

"Then they tried sleep deprivation. After that, they tried starving me." Steve bent in his chair, as much as his bindings would allow and yelled at the room's only exit and Seeker beyond. "And you still didn't break me!"

Now he began to laugh and the sound he made was more than a little unhinged. Marc studied Steve as the man continued to chuckle unevenly. His face was gaunt, stress, lack of sleep and food had left their marks. And then his eyes. Eyes like a Soul, a shimmer of silver in a ring around the pupil. But these eyes were filled with a wild outrage, so unlike anything Marc had seen before. It made for a very disturbing display.

"And let me tell you another thing," began Steve as his laughter died off and he started a new rant.
Marc sighed and made a show of glancing at his watch.

Steve stopped his complaining as he took note of Marc's indifferent behavior. Anger swelled in the young man. "Am I boring you, Marc?"

"Yes!" yelled back Marc as he abruptly smacked his hand down on the table with a forceful bang. His sudden shift from patient observer to outright anger stopped Steve short.

Driving himself out of his chair, Marc leaned over the desk and took advantage of the younger man's stunned silence. "I've sat here for the last five minutes while you screamed your head off! I get it! Sucks to be you! The Seekers have done a half-assed job trying to get information out of you. I assume, like all torture whether it was done well or not, it was pretty awful." He lowered himself back to his chair and added in a quieter voice, "While it doesn't mean much, Steve, I'm sorry it happened."

"How? How can you work for them?" Steve's anger had distilled down to reproachful disgust towards Marc.

Letting out another long sigh Marc replied wearily. "I've spent a lot of time thinking it over. Trust me it wasn't an easy decision to reach for me or any others who decided to...help." He said the last world like it was being dragged out of his mouth. "But if you must know, it comes down to that old saying – 'It's better to deal with the devil you know than the devil you don't.'"

"And I know Seekers, Steve," explained Marc. "I know what they are capable of and what they aren't. I can handle them. What I don't know is this 'Facility' and the people who are a part of it. I don't get them."

"Duh, they're fighting the invasion!" shot back Steve.

"There's battling to free the planet and then there's general insanity. From where I'm sitting, these 'Facility' people fall into the latter."

Steve made a scoffing noise, halfway between a snort of derision and a laugh. But he did not dispute Marc's description of the facility. Taking Steve's lack of a comeback as an opening, Marc resumed. "See, I get the plague they started. They're a group wanting to hit the buggers. They don't have the forces to take them on directly, but they're either smart enough or lucky enough to find a chink in the armor of the Soul's medicine. So they spread their little germ and sit back and watch the results. And its minimal risk for the Facility. Even when the Souls figure out the disease isn't natural, they aren't going to know who released it."

"Now don't get me wrong," contended Marc as Steve sullenly watched him. "What they did was cold blooded as hell. They released a strain of bacteria designed to kill any human infected with it in just a few days. So I can't really cheer on the guys who were slowly killing my friends and me. But like I said, I can understand their reasoning."

"If you're asking me about the bio-plague weapon, I don't..." began Steve.

"I'm not," cut in Marc. "There's literally an army of Soul Healers working over that bug. I'm sure they can figure it out all on their own. No, the part I don't understand is you and your little assassination squad sent to the city."

"Really?" mocked Steve. "What's so complicated about it? The buggers needed to be taken down a peg or two. Show'em we can hit them no matter where they live."

"Alright, fine," said Marc with a shrug. "You guys shoot up an office building and kill a bunch of
worms. Great, mission accomplished. But strategically it makes no sense. The people of the Facility showed their hand. Risked their spies and exposed their capabilities for little real benefit. Their greatest asset was their anonymity. I remember listening to Adams rave about raising armies and the coming war. But all he managed was to paint a giant target on the Facility's back."

"Well, you've got me, Marc," replied Steve with a patronizing smile. "I guess we all should bow down and beg forgiveness from our new lords and masters, just like you." His smile turned to outright disgust. "Why even bother putting a worm in you? You're already a good, obedient slave."

Marc's calm and confident pose started to crack. "Listen you little snot," glowered Marc. "I've put myself on the line more times than I can count to protect our people. I'm trying to save what remains of us. Not get us all wiped out. Every time you shoot a Soul, blow 'em up, or whatever method you chose to kill, you are destroying any chance of saving the human host. Do you honestly think you can win like that?"

"I'd say it's a start," came the defiant reply.

They glared at each other across the table for a long moment. Steve finally looked away. "Com'on," he muttered. "Just get on with it. Hit me, kick me. Do whatever those bastard Seekers are too spineless to do themselves."

"Alright," replied Marc softly. Reaching into his pocket, Marc pulled out his chosen instrument of torture and laid it face up on the table.

A scowl passed over Steve's face. "What's is this?" he questioned as he looked at the photograph Marc had just put on the table.

"That," informed Marc as he tapped the edge of the photo portraying a smiling teenage boy, "is the best picture I have of Tim Bradford."

Confusion grew in Steve's strange eyes. "Who?" he asked uncertainly.

"The boy you murdered," clarified Marc in a voice laced with both pain and rage.

The blood drained from the young man's face. He apparently had not expected this from Marc. Watching, Marc saw Steve glance from the photo to several spots around the room and then back to the picture. He could not meet Marc's steady gaze. Eventually, he ended up staring at his restrained hands. Falteringly he mumbled out, "Oh…yeah…the kid."

"His name is Tim. Not kid. Being his killer, I would appreciate if you would call him by his name," commanded Marc.

"I didn't kill him!" retorted Steve with a fitful cry. "Adams did it! I didn't know he was going to do that."

Needing to know, Marc's next question came out soft and pleading. "Did Tim suffer?"

Steve bowed his head. "I-I don't think so. The kid…I mean…Tim was knocked out cold. Adams just pulled out his pistol and fired."

"So you didn't know they were going to stage Tim's murder and make it look like the Seekers did it?"

"All I knew we were to find and capture some of your people for interrogation," answered Steve. He looked up, meeting Marc's eyes. "Stopping the plague really ticked off people at the Facility."
"Well, we didn't get the memo," retorted Marc with angry sarcasm. "All I was trying to do was save people I care about!"

"Marc, you don't get it," snarled Steve. "You think I had any choice after the Facility recruited me? Or anyone else? You either do what they say or they put a bullet in the back of your head." Leaning forward as far as his restraints would allow, Steve's face grew somber. "It's not an idle threat. I watch them do it. One of the reclaimed was shot when he refused to obey orders."

Steve collapsed back into his chair, his breathing growing unsteady. Marc waited, judging when best to continue. "Reclaimed…Is that what they call it when they brought you back in control of your body?"

Shaky laughter came from Steve. "Yeah…that's what they call it." He swallowed hard, a painful rasp coming from his throat. "It's pretty bad when you have one of these jackass worms in your head. You can't move, you're utterly trapped. And Seeker Citrine was digging away in my mind for every secret."

A strong shudder ran through him, strong enough to make Steve's chair squeak in protest from his shaking. "But as awful as that was, it was nothing compared to the operation. You're awake when they do it, you feel everything. And it burns, feels like your whole body is on fire. Citrine just screamed and screamed in my head until I thought it was going to explode. Then all of a sudden he stopped…and hasn't made a sound since." Pressing his hand against his forehead, Steve whispered, "But I can still feel him, right behind my eyes."

"They lobotomized the Seeker in your head," stated Marc.

A slow nod came from the man. Fresh tears began to pool in his eyes. "Also made a wreck out of my own brain. I can remember places, but everybody's faces are blank." Now an open sob escaped Steve. "I…c-can't remember w-what my mom looks like."

Marc forced himself to take his own steadying breaths as Steve began to cry in earnest. Pity swelled in him. "Hey," said Marc gently, "you grew up in Detroit, right?"

"Y-Yeah," sniffled Steve.

"Remember your home when you were young? Maybe if you tell me about it, something might come back," offered Marc helpfully.

His voice weak and uncertain, Steve asked, "You think?"

"Can't hurt," said Marc with a shrug.

A little smile started on Steve Anderson's face. "Well, okay…I grew up in this old brick house on the west side…"

###

Wanda looked out over the gathering of Souls filling up the lobby of the Hotel Rose. Many eager faces were waiting for her speak. It seemed her calling as a Storyteller was not going to be one she would easily escape. Once again she was taking on the role of speaking about her past experiences. But unlike before, this would not be retelling about her singing as a Bat, or describing the giant ice towers of the Bears, or her pleasant time as a Flower. Instead, she would tell the tale of her last life. Of coming to Earth and being inserted into a young woman named Melanie Stryder.
"Hello," she said warmly to the crowd. A chorus of pleasant greetings was returned as she took her seat. The gathered Souls, in turn, sat down in an orderly semicircle around her.

"Thank you for making time for me," said Wanda with a smile. "I know many of you are busy, I appreciate you returning."

"Oh, it's not a problem at all, Wanderer," said Seeker Jade in the Hollows from the front row. Smiling sweetly, she added, "I do enjoy these little talks of yours."

With a little bit of effort, Wanda kept her smile fixed. She nodded slowly to Jade and replied, "Of course Seeker."

Jade was not exactly lying, but Wanda was quite sure the Seeker would rather she not speak with the gathered Souls. Jade, along with the other Seekers, had done their best to discourage the citizens of Chicago from visiting the Hotel Rose and the Humans living there. But the Souls had come anyway, some curious, others concerned, to learn not just about the Humans, but Wanderer herself. So instead of directly denying access, Jade had embedded herself with the others and listened very carefully to everything she had to say. Hopeful to glean some piece of information about the location of Jeb's caves.

Pushing aside her concerns about Jade, Wanda instead focused on the other Souls. "Now, where was I? I think I was talking about the corn harvest?"

"You were telling us about learning to bake bread with Trudy and Heidi," spoke up someone from the middle of the room.

Wanda nodded, recalling where she had left off yesterday afternoon. "Right," she hummed, thinking about what she wanted to cover today. She needed to be tactful about the details of her story. Not only to prevent Jade from learning something of importance, but also not overly frighten her listeners about the Humans.

She decided to start retelling of her times with Walter. It would be difficult. Her painful memories of losing the kindhearted Walter would be laid bare. Nor would it be easy for the other Souls to comprehend. Death was such a rare experience for her kind. But it was important they learned, it would help them understand the humans. She was about to start speaking when a young woman in the middle of assembled Souls slowly raised her hand.

Pointing to the upstretched arm, Wanda smiled and said, "Yes? You have a question?"

"Umm," hesitated the woman. She had long flowing light brown hair. Tumbling down her shoulders until it nearly reached her waist. A flower, a white lily, affixed to a hair barrette, was weaved into her lengthy tresses. "My name is Violets of the Night. You have spoken about Jamie and other children," her voice was soft and melodious. "Have you any experience with Human infants?"

"Well, not much," admitted Wanda. "But I'm quickly learning. As you know, Sarah recently gave birth to her son Tim. I've helped her change and bathe the little one. He's quite adorable."

Violets of the Night nodded serenely. "As is my daughter, Starlight Gleaming." Her eyes grew shiny, and not from the rings of silver in them. Joyous pride practically glowed on the woman's face. "She is most beautiful being I've ever seen."

Wanda felt her mouth open in astonishment. Her heart beat faster. "You mean she's…"

"Human," confirmed Violets of the Night. Around her, a steady rise of gasps of surprise came from
the other Souls. A little embarrassed by the attention she was drawing, Violets ducked her head and said apologetically, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be disruptive. But I was...hoping to ask some questions. I want to make sure I raise her right."

More whispers and quiet murmurs came from the crowd. Quick glances of bafflement and amazement whirred about the lobby. Wanda felt a rise of elation. This was unexpected, but also very welcome. Another Soul who wished to raise her offspring as Human.

But climbing above the chatter came an all too familiar voice. "What you are doing," said Jade in tenor unlike any Wanda had heard the Seeker use before, "is extremely reckless." She was standing now, her small face pale, pointing accusingly at Violets of the Night.

"But...But," stammered Violets, shocked by Jade's accusation. "Why?"

"I know what you're thinking," answered Jade sternly. "The child is cute and innocent. She smiles and giggles when you hold her and is entirely dependent upon you. But have you not considered at all what will happen when she grows older?"

"Starlight Gleaming will be raised carefully. My partner and I will see to it," replied the Soul with confidence.

"You have no idea what you are doing," informed Jade coldly. "You're already asking for help from Wanderer. It is clear you are getting in over your head. For now, the child knows no better. But as she grows, she will learn. One day she'll understand how unlike she is from you and everyone else. And then she'll do what all humans do when faced with something different - she will destroy you."

"No!" cried Violets of the Night in horror. "Starlight Gleaming will do no such thing!" Tears were beginning to fall, big drops sliding down her face. Weepily she went on, "When she laughs, I laugh. When she cries, I feel as if my human heart is breaking."

"You are letting simplistic, sentimental emotions affect you," declared Jade firmly.

By now the room was filled with an intensifying cadence of voices. Many Souls questioning each other, apprehension at Jade's claims by some, others worried over Violets of Night's abrupt breakdown.

Feeling the whole situation was spiraling out of control, Wanda found herself calling for calm. It was as if she was with a group of irate Humans, not her own people. Turning to the instigator, Wanda felt a rare bloom of real anger start in her chest. "Jade," she said as harshly as her body would allow. "You're upsetting her! There is no need for this kind of talk."

"Wanderer," snapped Jade. "I am trying to protect her." Jade turned back to the others in the crowd. "I am the one attempting to protect you all. None of you see the danger here. None of you see the peril of letting these Humans reproduce."

Wanda shook her head, dismayed by the Seekers claims. "Jade, you can't possibly know how Starlight Gleaming or any other Human child will turn out. You claim they will hate us and want to kill us, but you don't know."

Jade's face twisted into a cold smile. "I've read through much of the Humans' history. Over and over they have sought to destroy each other over the slightest perceived difference. It is in their nature."

"That is hardly proof," countered Wanda. "I've seen another Soul couple with a Human child. The
toddler loved his parents and they loved him. Just as Violets loves her daughter. We need not fear them.

"Again you only see the child, you only see the innocence," replied Jade with a tired, irritated shake of her head. "You are terribly naive, Wanderer. Can you not comprehend that Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin were once all small, helpless infants? I'm sure they were all loved by their parents as well. That did not stop them from growing up and becoming monsters."

An inkling of the names and their meaning twitched in Wanda's memories. Something from her review of the Humans' history and a bit of Mel's own memories. Human leaders who would steer their people to war and destruction. But did not know the details of their lives and could not properly refute Jade's claim.

"You're exaggerating, Jade. Hardly every human turns into some sort of warmonger," said Wanda wearily. She could see their debate was rapidly throwing her plans into complete disarray.

Jade held up one finger. "It only takes one," she said to Wanda and then to the other Souls. Wanda could see the apprehensive concern on many of their faces. Gesturing upward to where Ian and the others were currently confined Jade went on, "So what if you have found a few peaceful Humans, Wanderer? Sooner or later there will come one who can convince the others to rise up again. To turn them against order and decency. It is why we must remain vigilant."

In the end, it did not take beatings, starvation, sleep deprivation, or any other conventional forms of torture to get Agent Steve Anderson to spill his secrets. All that was needed was for someone to listen.

Marc and Steve had begun with talking about their respective childhoods. While their backgrounds could not be more different, they both shared the pain of losing their fathers at an early age. Marc's to a careless drunk driver, Steve's to the Souls' invasion. Marc could not help but feel a surge of self-loathing as Steve told him about his father's brave last stand against the Seekers. Steve had every right to hate the Souls.

But soon Steve started to talk freely. Marc had to coax him less and less for details as time went on. After months of isolation, Steve desperately wanted some form of human contact. There was a deep need in the man to tell his story. It mirrored Mia's story in many details. Being knocked out, waking in a mysterious underground lab, and the horrific surgery he was put through. Like Mia, he knew little about where was or any of people who operated on him.

"Nah man, Gray and Williams were some sort of army guys," said Steve as he now explained about his former teammates. "I don't know much about Kendrick, the guy hardly ever talked." Then Steve's face wrinkled in disgust. "And then Kane Adams, he really was a nut case."

"Preaching to the choir," said Marc, leaning back in his chair.

"I can only imagine what was done to him," said Steve with a sad shake of his head. "Those inky black eyes of his. Creepy..."

Marc remembered the soul black dead eyes of the bald-headed Adams and suppressed a shudder. A monster by every definition. But did even Adams deserve his fate of dissection by the Souls? Marc
hated what he was doing. He hoped with every fiber of his being this interview would soon be over.

"Yeah and talking about eyes," continued Steve, oblivious to Marc's discomfort. "Mine still give me a start when I look in the mirror." He smiled wistfully and said, "I remember when they brought me to that old farmhouse in Covington. Got my first real chance to see myself after the operation…"

Steve stopped talking and Marc jerked forward in his seat at the same moment. They both stared at each other wordlessly. Stunned, Marc realized that was it. Steve had slipped up and said something he shouldn't. A farm house in someplace called Covington. A clue.

Realizing what he had done, Steve paled. "You son-of-a-bitch," he cried out.

But Marc was not listening. He was already out of his chair and heading for the door. He would not have had anything to say to Steve even if he did stay. When Sage of Tides had come to Marc with his request that the Humans attempt to convince Steve to talk, Marc had initially rebuffed the Seeker. He had wanted no part in the Seekers’ plans to extract information from the agent. But Sage had persisted and made it clear he expected Marc's help. It would prove, explained Sage, to the other Seekers that Marc's small band of Humans were committed to peace. Left with little choice, Marc chose a few trusted people to make a plan. He, Scott, Dell, and Simon had quietly cooked up the idea to use Tim's death as leverage on Steve. They had all volunteered to help Marc with the questioning, but Marc had refused. This loathsome task would be his alone.

Flinging open the door, Marc stormed out. In the hallway a swarm of Seekers buzzed about, already running off to track down leads from Marc's interrogation. Among the bustle of Souls, the gray-haired, stern face of Sage of Tides appeared. Back in his original host body, the Seeker coolly appraised Marc.

"Happy!?” growled Marc.

Sage of Tides slowly nodded. "Very well done, Mister Walters."

Marc felt sick. What or whoever the people of the 'Facility' were, he had just helped destroy them. Whether or not they deserved this doom, Marc did not know. In their course of fighting the Souls they had thrown away every bit of ethics. They experimented on Mia, Steve, and who knew how many other people. Turned others like Kane Adams into weapons. Killed people he had cared about. But it hardly mattered now. Now the Seekers would hunt them down. Swarm the Facility by the thousands.

Needing to get away from Sage and every other Soul, Marc turned about and marched down the hallway. A tight knot of rage in his chest and a dark scowl on his face as he moved. He had only gone a short distance when he felt a gentle hand close on his arm. Spinning around, Marc was ready to tear into whoever would be stupid enough to bother him. But when he saw her tear streaked face, his anger failed him.

"Marc, I'm sorry," whispered Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. "I'm so, so sorry."

He was surprised by how quietly he spoke to her, "There's no coming back from this." Traitor, Collaborator, Betrayer, he was all of these things now.

"I know," she answered with fresh tears.

With his anger draining away, Marc found he could barely stand. Bright Moon's arms came around
him and Marc felt himself sag against her. There was nothing more for either one to say. Silently they held on to each other while all about them the Seekers made plans to destroy the last Human threat on Earth.

###

Ian ran his fingers through his damp hair, ringing a few extra drops out. The hotel's bathrooms were not very spacious. It managed to squeeze a sink, a toilet, and a bathtub in a space only a little larger than a broom closet. So stepping out the tub, swinging his towel over the shower rod, and then turning to peer into the mirror over the sink could basically be done in one step. The shower had been just what he needed. Small as the bathroom was and while he wished he was back in the safety of Jeb's caves, he had to admit it has hard to beat indoor plumbing.

Wiping the dewy condensation from his shower off the mirror, he studied his reflection. He could still make out the slight off-coloring of his face. It stretched from his right side, just below the cheek bone and ran down his neck. Ian experimentally poked the area by his jaw. From his skin to the muscle, and then the bone underneath he could not feel any difference in the regenerated tissue.

He remembered the end. His and Dell's desperate last stand as they had fought a team of Seekers. Hearing the shots and seeing Dell hit the floor. The Seekers had then rushed him, but Ian knew of one final defense. An ingenious little reworking of the gas line in the kitchen. It would not make a huge explosion, but enough to slow the Seekers down from pursuing the running survivors. He had lit the trigger just as the Seekers grabbed him. Strangely he never remembered any pain. Just the roar, the inferno, and then one last thought of Wanda. Then to wake up, good as new. Another miracle of Soul medical science.

Letting out a resigned sigh at how surreal his life had become, Ian started getting dressed. After pulling on t-shirt and sweat pants, he opened the bathroom door to let the remaining foggy air dissipate. As he rummaged through his toiletries, he called out, "I'll be done in a minute."

A vague reply came from the room beyond. After brushing his teeth, Ian padded out into his and Wanda's shared bedroom. They had managed to get one of the larger rooms. A nice queen sized bed with enough space left over for a simple desk and two reclining chairs. By no means was the hotel room fancy or extravagant, but it represented a level of luxury Ian thought he would never see again.

"I'm all done and we've still got some hot water," Ian informed Wanda.

"Hmm…" expressed Wanda without looking up.

She was sitting on the bed, her legs folded under her. One hand was idly twisting a long strand of her golden hair while the other was slowly turning pages of a very large and old book. Arrayed around her was dozens of lined papers with Wanda's neat and precise handwriting. Her eyes were wholly focused on the pages of the book and her notes.

Smiling, Ian repeated, "Hon, I'm finished in the bathroom, you can get in."

"M-hm," was her only response.

Amusement tugged on his smile and made it grow. "Wanda," said Ian evenly, "I've decided to become a Seeker and hunt wild Mongooses in Africa. I think they could make excellent hosts for you Souls."
She stopped reading and a puzzled frown started on her face. Glancing up, she said, "Wha?"

"I said, I'm done with the shower. It's your turn," explained Ian while trying to keep the laughter out of his voice.

"Oh…" replied Wanda as she blinked in addled confusion. "I thought you were saying something about Africa."

With a patient nod of his head, Ian sat down on the bed, careful to not disturb any of Wanda's extensive records. She had been like this since before dinner. "I heard about your little dustup with Seeker Jade today."

Wanda's frown deepened and she shook her head sternly. "We were not fighting. It was a debate, a lively one - even by your standards - but not a so called 'dustup.'"

"Call it what you want. But you've had your head in that book ever since."

Wanda placed a marker on the page she was reading and closed the book. On its cover, the title – "World History: A Concise Analysis" was printed in large bold, red letters. The rest of the cover taken up by a large globe which blended multiple pictures from around the world, both modern and ancient. Most of the images and the book's jacket were faded and sported more than few blemishes, owning to its regular use by Mary-Margret and then Sarah as teaching material.

Collecting her papers, Wanda said, "Jade knows your history better than I do." She could not keep the irritation out of her voice. "I need to learn it. I have a feeling our debate will not be the last."

Ian cocked his head, curious. "So what do you think? I mean you know a summary of our history and that was from a Soul perspective." He tapped the cover the history book. "We wrote this and it would be considerably more detailed."

Wanda's eyes flickered down to the book and remained there. She started, "It's umm…" but held off from continuing.

"You can say it," encouraged Ian.


She stopped and arched her back, working out a kink. Ian maneuvered himself so we could get behind her and began to gently rub her back. "And the authors of this book, they're so…nonchalant about everything. A war rages, thousands die, and they seem to barely care."

"Well…" started Ian, as he tried to figure out how to describe to Wanda the intricacies of humanity's history and the attempt to teach it. "This is a history book used in schools. It aims to be more factual and neutral to historical events, not actually to provide an emotional part. A lot of times it will be the first time a student hears about them. Mostly the writers hope to provide some type of context." He smiled a little ruefully and added, "Not all of us can inherit memories from our mothers."

"Hmm…I suppose," replied a crestfallen Wanda. Collecting her notes and piling them on top the history book, Wanda settled back against Ian. He wrapped his arms around her and she gratefully nestled herself to him.

Ian buried his face in Wanda's golden curls. Her hair tickled his nose as he inhaled quietly and she
let out a little burst of giggles from his touch. Giving the top of her head a soft kiss, Ian leaned back and mused over Souls and their history. "What's it like? I mean, to be born with all these memories?"

Wanda was silent for a long time, lost deep in thought. Eventually, she answered. "I've never had to try to describe how it feels. We all have pieces of our mothers' memory, we all just know. I could almost explain it like waking up from a very vivid dream. Except the dream is of our mother's life. But even that is a poor description." She tossed her head back and looked up at him through her blonde locks. "I could ask the same of you. What's it like to be born knowing nothing? With no identity of yourself or your people?"

"It's not like I remember my own birth," Ian replied with a chuckle. After a pause to consider, he answered, "It's a pain in the butt. Every kid has to learn everything from scratch. Each one of us bumbling around as we figure life out." Nodding towards the history book, he said, "It's no wonder we mess up so much. If we don't learn our own past, we're doomed to repeat it."

"True," agreed Wanda. She let out a little sigh and shook her head. "And yet, I can see the downside to our way as well."

"How's that?" asked Ian.

"As Jade and I argued over Souls raising Human children, the flaw became self-evident to me. Jade sees only danger as these Humans grow to adulthood. The idea the children could be anything else was impossible to her."

While still in his embrace, Wanda shifted to better see Ian's face. "Jade considers other races a threat to Souls because all her experiences tell her they are a threat. Experiences that are built in part from her mother's memories. And her mother's, mother's memories. She's become trapped in a fixed notion."

"And it's the same for all of us," said Wanda unhappily. "Each new generation of Souls inherits memories which only reinforces the same ideas and practices. After enough time all our philosophies and beliefs become certainties. Our invasion of Earth was predicated on the assumption it was for the greater good. But none of us ever questioned if it truly was."

"You did," pointed out Ian.

"Yes, but I wouldn't if hadn't been for Mel. And Jamie..." Wanda stopped and she gave him an apologetic smile. "Actually all of you pesky Humans. You forced me to confront uncomfortable truths."

Ian's grin grew to match Wanda's. "You forced us to change as well. Humans can become just as stuck in our ways as the Souls. If you hadn't been brave enough to risk coming to find Jeb's caves we'd all still be out in the desert and likely in a lot worse shape."

Wanda let her head rest on his chest. Ian held her tight. "We can help each other," she whispered softly, "Both races can learn and grow. I know it. I just need to get everyone to listen."

####

Red Leaves Caught in the Wind finished washing her hands and then pulled open the bathroom door. It was late and the hospital was on its night shift as she walked back to Mia's room. Most of the areas dimmed and their occupants already asleep. Only two Healers sat in the nursing station
for the entire floor. They waved as she passed by and Red Leaves politely returned their greeting. It was so quiet she could even hear her nightgown swishing along the floor as she walked.

Dawn Runner had made such fuss about her staying the night. As if it was such a big deal to sleep in a hospital. How was it any really different from sleepovers with her other friends? She would be as safe here as if she was sleeping in her own bed. And besides, it was important, Mia needed her.

It was strange having a friend like Mia, consider Red Leaves as she strolled down the empty hallway. Sometimes the girl acted very much like her other friends. Calm and rational. Other times, Mia was like when they first met, a bundle of energy and chaos. But this Mia also told the best stories. Exciting tales of her people's time living underground. Like the time rats got past the traps and tried to steal all their food. Red Leaves was quite sure Mia made up half of what she told her, but it was still fun to listen to her tales. And then there were times when Mia would become very scared. Almost everyone and everything terrified her, except for Red Leaves. Somehow she had become one of the few calming influences on Mia.

As she rounded the corner, Mia's room was straight ahead. Seeker Justin sat just outside the room. The Seeker seemed to have a permeant concerned little frown on his face which stood out in an odd contrast to his fairly big body. He or one of the other Seekers were always here, keeping a careful eye on Mia.

The Seeker glanced up as Red Leaves approached. "You should be getting back to sleep, little leaf," he rumbled softly.

"I know, Seeker," replied Red Leaves in a hushed tone. She did not want to be too loud. Recently Mia had started experiencing nightmares and slept fitfully. Red Leaves little sleepover was an attempt by the Healers to help Mia get a good night sleep.

As if almost on cue, when Red Leaves reached the threshold of the door she heard a faint moan come from Mia's bed.

"Oh no," sighed Red Leaves.

Seeker Justin, also hearing the weak wail, turned to look into the darkened room. "Perhaps it will pass," he offered.

Red Leaves did not want to dispute Seeker Justin's opinion, but she knew better. In the dim light cast from the hallway, she could see Mia's form already beginning to shake.

Mia moaned out, "No…Noo…Noooo."

"It's alright Mia," said Red Leaves as came around to the bed. Reaching out she lay a tentative hand on the trembling Human. "You're fine. You're safe." 

Now the trembling became outright trashing. "Stop…Stop it!" cried Mia.

From the doorway, Red Leaves heard Seeker Justin speak up. "I shall get the Healers."

"No, I can handle it," replied Red Leaves urgently, determined to help. She crawled into bed and wrapped her arms around the quaking Mia. "Shhhhh," hushed Red Leaves as she tried to comfort her friend through the nightmare.

"Ahhh!" screamed out Mia and then sat bolt upright, so fast she nearly flung Red Leaves off. But the Soul held on as Mia's panicked screams died down to despondent sobs.
"It's okay," she whispered as she continued to calm Mia down. "It's just a bad dream. That's all." Red Leaves knew it was more than that. Something terrible had been done to Mia. Generally, Mia could only remember bits and pieces when she was awake. But when she slept, some part of it, perhaps the darkest and most terrifying, would emerge in her dreams.

"He finds me…always finds me…" whimpered out Mia. She still trembled in Red Leaves grip. She was so afraid.

Red Leaves tried hard to be brave, but sometimes, like now, Mia's fears were infectious. Timidly she asked, "Who does?"

Mia snuffled as she regained some control over breathing. Her voice was childlike as she answered. "The monster finds me. No matter where I hide. The monster with the red-yellow eyes always finds me."

---

Ian came awake all at once. He was not sure what had awakened him. Be it a dream or some outside force he could not tell. Almost subconsciously he knew Wanda was not in the bed. Her weight upon the mattress was missing and he was used to her small body being curled against him. The warmth of her skin on his.

Even after confessing her concerns over Seeker Jade and her subsequence shower, Ian knew Wanda was still upset. She had tossed and turned until finally drifting off into an uneasy sleep. Ian had soon joined her, but as he groggily looked around it was clear she had not remained asleep for very long.

Wanda sat at the small desk with the reading lamp turned on. It created a small cone of light, illuminating little more than herself and the wooden surface of the piece of furniture. She was hunched over and Ian could make out the history book held on her lap.

Glancing at the clock by his nightstand, Ian said sleepily, "Hon, it's either very late or very early. Come back to bed."

When she did not answer, Ian got out of bed. Crossing the room, he crouched down next to her chair. She had not fallen asleep in it as he had first thought. She was staring down, wide-eyed, at a page in the book.

With care, he squeezed her arm. "Wanda, what's wrong?"

"I don't…" she began but trail off, still wholly focused on the page before her.

Ian shifted so he could see what she was reading. On the page opposite to one holding Wanda's attention was the title of the chapter she was currently reading. It read – 'Mesopotamia – Cradle of Civilization.' Beyond a small map depicting the locations of a few of humanity's earliest cities, the page was filled with text.

But on the page Wanda was so keenly focused was a picture. It was of some sort of sculpture. Something old, worn down and weathered over the course of many centuries. Looking closer, the statue was of a man…no not a man, corrected Ian as he continued studying the image. The figure was tall and thin. A wicked looking head sat atop narrow shoulders with long arms and odd stubby-fingered hands. What stood out the most, however, were the four strange wings which grew from its back. A bizarre combination, looking like a cross between a butterfly's and an eagle's wings.
Ian read the title under the picture of the strange statue. 'Bronze statuette of the Sumerian Demon Pazuzu, circa 1200 BC.'

Wondering why this old relic from a long dead civilization would bother her so much, Ian pulled the book from Wanda. She blinked, a little sleepily, as he gazed at her questioningly. Wanda shook her head, back and forth as if she was trying to shake the image from her mind.

"Why? What is it?" asked a concerned Ian.

"It's just...Well...the statue sort of looks like a Vulture."

Chapter End Notes

Getting close to catching up with the first chapter, just a few more chapters. As always, read, review, and enjoy.
"Tanks? Really?"

Two bulky gray-green tanks were carefully being loaded into a large transport shuttle. Marc had asked the question as he watched the flurry of activity from the Seekers on the tarmac. His expression, in fact, his whole body virtually radiated a weary sardonic resentment at having to witness the events unfolding at Chicago's O'Hare Airport.

"There was a philosophy of thought by your military," replied Sage of Tides from beside him. "It is better to have a weapon and not need it than to need a weapon and not have it."

Marc turned from the concourse window to face the de facto leader of the Seekers. "So now you're quoting our military. Sage, you're picking up some bad habits for a 'peaceful' Soul."

Sage glanced at Marc but did not turn. His detached, stoic posture hid any sign of reaction to Marc's taunt. When the Seeker had been in Bright Moon's host, Sage presented a nearly unshakable authority. Now in his original host, a stern-faced middle-aged man the effect was even greater.

"I've studied many unpleasant topics since coming to this world," replied the Seeker. "Your kind fought with each other so much you became experts at war. And unfortunately, I too had to become knowledgeable."

With a mild wave of his hand, Sage indicated the treaded war machines and then further to where a row of camouflaged painted combat helicopters was parked. "As for the tanks and even the helicopters, yes we will most likely not need them. But we're going up against many unknowns with the Facility. I wish to be prepared for all contingencies."

"Whatever," sighed Marc as he turned away from the outside spectacle.

Walking over to the row of chairs where Bright Moon was waiting, Marc took a seat next to her. Both of them were acutely aware of the mass of Seekers moving through the terminal just a handful of steps outside the waiting area. In the last few days, Seekers had been flying into the city, amassing a force of the aliens far larger than Marc had ever seen.

Silently Bright Moon glanced between Marc, Sage, and then the orderly rows of traveling Seekers. There was a faint air of awkwardness around Bright Moon when she was around other Seekers. They still saw he as an outsider, a traitor to her calling. Her unease was even more pronounced when she was near Sage of Tides.

Marc gave her hand a gentle little squeeze, a small sign of support. "Alright," he said with some manufactured cheer. "I assume you didn't drag us over here to show us your collection of army toys. What do you want Sage?"

"As you know," began Sage without any preamble, "Steve Anderson revealed he stayed for a time in a place he called Covington. After careful research, we were successful in tracking down the location to the town of Covington, Michigan. It's a small village, located deep in the rural north woodlands."

Growing curious Bright Moon asked, "What did you find?"

"Mr. Anderson spoke of a farmhouse. Through an exhaustive search of the area, we tracked down the site. It was believed by the locals to be abandoned. Remote enough to not have any nearby
neighbors. But we found evidence there which quickly convinced us the farm had indeed been recently occupied."

"Okay, but there could be a ton of different explanation for that," Marc pointed out. "Humans could have been living there, but that doesn't mean they had anything to do with the Facility."

"True," admitted Sage, "But we have other pieces of evidence that help confirm this site acted as a safehouse used by the Facility."

Marc frowned. "Wait," he said, "You already had an idea where to look, didn't you?"

"Very astute, Mr. Walters," replied Sage of Tides with a small smile.

Marc's frown deepened into a scowl. "Was everything with Steve just a test for me? You already knew!?"

"No," replied Sage with an emphatic shake of his head. "We had data which pointed us towards northern Michigan already. But we had very few details and the area is large and sparsely populated. Many places to hide. Your interrogation of Mr. Anderson helped us narrow our search considerably."

"Great," replied Marc with a humorless smile.

"What other evidence did you have?" asked Bright Moon.

Sage hesitated, apparently uncertain if wanted to share the information with Bright Moon and Marc. He sat down across from them and then with a small nod he came to his decision.

"Since the discovery of Agent Rebecca Anderson working as Seeker Simple Sunlight, we had begun a full sweep of our organization to locate any other agents. In the proceeding weeks we had several 'Seekers' suddenly disappear. Investigating their homes and pasts revealed they were not who they claimed to be."

"They were being recalled, getting out before they were discovered," said Bright Moon.

"Yes," agreed Sage. "However, one of the Facility agents remained and infiltrated our Washington DC operation center. He had assumed the identity of a Seeker named Grey Dawns, he covertly sent information back to the rebel Humans. Just before he was caught, he attempted to send a large amount of data offsite. Recently tightened security measures prevented the transmission."

Bright Moon leaned forward, absorbed by the Seeker's explanation. Marc stayed with his arms crossed, irritability wishing the Seeker would just get to the reason why he had requested their presence.

"When we analyzed his workstation," continued on Sage, "we recovered trace evidence of previous data downloads. All sent to someplace in either northern Michigan or Minnesota. Since then we have worked steadily to gather further evidence and prepare to make our move."

"And this 'Grey Dawns,' what happened to him?" questioned Bright Moon.

"He killed himself before capture," explained Sage. "These agents have been fitted with a Cyanide pill hidden within a fake tooth. Very cloak and dagger." He shook his head sadly, "and such a waste of life."

Marc jumped out his seat and began to stride back and forth in the aisle between Bright Moon and
Sage of Tides. "I think you're just irritated the Facility took your playbook and flipped it on its head."

Agitatedly pacing, he continued, "You Souls invade us, slipping in and taking over our leaders, military, all the important positions. Hidden right among us you are able to learn everything you need to take us down." A wry smile started on Marc's face. "So the Facility watches and learns. Says, 'Hey, turnabout is fair play.' And then they start infiltrating you."

"I'm aware of the irony of the situation," said Sage of Tides. His voice had turned lower and a hint of anger came through in his words. "I suppose you could say we aren't used to getting a taste of our own medicine."

Marc stopped his pacing, he did not appear to have heard Sage. His eyes had gone distant and a confused frown creased his forehead. All of a sudden Marc started pacing again. Back and forth in quick, short steps.

Bright Moon and Sage watched the Human move about. Both Seekers exchanged a glance at Marc's antics.

"He says this helps him think," said Bright Moon with a shrug.

"So I've heard," replied Sage.

"It's like the Facility is spoiling for a fight with the Seekers or something," said Marc. He spoke more to himself than either Bright Moon or Sage. Finally, he stopped pacing and started to explain. "All the other agents bug out when you come looking. But not the one in DC. Why does he stay? What's he doing that worth the risk?"

"The information he was attempting to steal dealt with our plans for deploying against a large force of rebel humans," answered Sage.

"In other words," replied Marc as he swung his arm around to indicate the groups of Seekers loading onto waiting shuttles, "what you're doing right now."

"Yes, but the data was not sent. They do not know how we will respond."

"Sage, the Facility doesn't have an army. If they had one, they'd have used it by now."

"We don't know what they are capable of doing. And as you've pointed out, Mr. Walters, we should not underestimate the people of the Facility."

With his eyes closed, Marc rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. "But why now? What's changed? They were subtle and operated in the shadows for a long time, taking a couple Souls here and there for their experiments. Never attracting enough attention. Even their plague was covertly done, no one had any idea who was responsible till Adams admitted to it."

"He practically gloated about it," said Bright Moon thoughtfully. She turned to Sage of Tides. "The Humans of the Facility want a confrontation."

Nodding in agreement, Marc added, "They're up to something."

"I do concur with both you," announced Sage of Tide. "A trap of some sort is being prepared. Perhaps another biological weapon has been created, or a chemical one."

"Maybe even a nuke?" speculated Marc.
"It is possible," agreed Sage grimly.

"Then is it a good idea to run around the woods looking for them?" asked Marc.

"We are very cautious." Sage pointed to the many shuttles on the airport's tarmac. "We are deploying many of our most skilled Seekers from around the world. Enough soldiers to successfully counter any traps the Facility might have at their disposal. And I am not only bringing Human tools of war for our mission but much of our technology as well. We will be well prepared for any weapons the Facility might use."

Marc sat down with an air of resigned defeat. "Well best of luck to you," he said.

"If I'm to bring the very best I have to this confrontation, I would like you, Mr. Walters, to be there." He said this while looking at Marc, but then he gave a sidelong glance to Bright Moon. "In fact both of you. The two of you…work well together."

Bright Moon looked quite surprised at the Seeker's request, but Marc let out a snort. "Sage, you don't need me when you go to kill some Humans who are crazy enough to call down an army of Seekers on themselves."

"I disagree, Marc. You are very intuitive and you know how we Souls think and where we may miss something. You could see a trap we do not."

Marc remained unconvinced. Crossing his arms, he sternly shook his head, refusing to budge. He was then surprised when Sage's stern face softened. "Please?" asked the Seeker. "I know I have demanded much from you. Put you in a position of great stress. I know you don't care for me or what we've done. But let us put an end to the Facility and we can move on to a more lasting peace between our two races."

Eying the Seeker apprehensively, Marc asked, "what are you saying?"

"If there is one area where I am in complete agreement with Wanderer - it is there have been enough deaths of both our peoples. We need to find new ways to live together."

"You would propose a peace agreement with all the remaining Humans?" asked a shocked Bright Moon.

"Yes," answered Sage.

Marc still remained wary. Unwilling to believe the prospect of a real and lasting peace. "And just like that, all the Seekers will bow to your command?"

Sage of Tides actually laughed. "No," he chuckled, "it will not be that simple. I foresee a good deal of debate between us Seekers and likely many other Souls."

"Like a blonde haired Seeker so high," and Marc held out a hand indicating some of a short height, "who's a real pain in the ass."

Shaking his head, Sage's stern face reappeared. "Seeker Jade of the Hollows is passionate about her work. She believes fully in our policies. But even Jade can understand the logic of finding peace over further conflict."

"I don't know," said Marc doubtfully.

"Marc," said Bright Moon gently, "at one time I was just like Jade. I believed in what I was doing."
A smile worked its way onto her face. "You changed me."

It started small, but a playful little smile broke out on Marc's face. "Oh, you're saying I should date Jade."

Bright Moon glowered at him, but there was a hint of humor in her eyes as well. "Don't start mister."

"I wouldn't dream of it dear," replied Marc as he leaned over and kissed Bright Moon on the cheek, causing her blush furiously.

Sage of Tides watched the two with a look of bemusement. He stood up saying, "I will not demand either of you come with me. Nor is my willingness to find peace with the other humans a reward. I will give it whether you come with me or not. But I believe it would for best if you did."

With a sigh, Marc asked, "When are you going?"

"Tomorrow morning," answered Sage. "We are in the process of establishing a command and control center. It's in a bunker located at an old military air force base. From there we'll coordinate with the rest of the Seekers."

Bright Moon watched Sage leave the waiting area. He was quickly busy speaking with a group of Seekers waiting to board a departing shuttle. Marc remained still, deep in though.

"What do you think?" she asked Marc.

"Honestly," replied Marc, "I'm not sure if we should celebrate or be very worried."

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"Ian, there's no way around it," said Mike in between forking a syrup covered portion of pancake into his mouth. "Wanda is developing one serious case of the baby rabies. You've seen how she gushes over little Tim every time she around him."

"Uhh…" began Ian, his own forkful of blueberry pancake halting midway between his plate and mouth. Mike's casually spoken bombshell of a comment had caught him completely off guard. "Well… You know Wanda's got a very motherly nature… umm… When she was around Jamie, she was very devoted to him."

"Huh," broke in Scott as he sat down at their makeshift table. Turning to Mike, he asked, "You think their age difference will be a problem when raising some little O'Sheas?"

Feeling his face flush, Ian shot back, "Now just a damn second, I know Wanda's host body is a little on the young side. And in a traditional relationship it would be considered inappropriate. But with a Soul…"

Scott shook his head with a wide smirk on his face. "Got it backward there O'Shea. Wanda's the older one in your relationship. I mean how many centuries has she been alive?"

"Yeah," put in Mike. "She's really robbing the cradle."

Ian looked at the two men. Both wore smug little smiles and hint of amusement in their eyes. They were joking with him. "Very funny," he grumbled as Scott and Mike began to laugh.
From a nearby chair Eric, who was doing his best to balance his plate of pancakes and a laptop computer on his knees, spoke up nonchalantly. "Well interspecies relationship difficulties aside Ian, it is looking like the only way we repopulate the species is to do it the old fashioned way. So remember that when you're taking your alien girlfriend to bed. You're not just doing it for the sex; you're doing it for humanity."

Mike nearly choked on his food. Coughing a few times, he managed to sputter out "Good one!" All three men were rapidly doubling over in laughter. Ian's anger and embarrassment fought within him and his annoyance quickly took the lead. "Are you guys done? Or do you have more brain damaged insights to give?" he angrily retorted.

"Sorry man," apologized Scott in a way that made it clear he was not. "But there is nothing good on TV, we have to get our entertainment somewhere."

"I had to put up with this from my asshole of a brother. Kyle's family, you're not," Ian growled at all three men.

"Easy Ian," said Kate from the seat across from Eric. So far she had been ignoring them. Looking up from the medical book she was reading, she twisted her head back and forth. "Honestly," she said, "put more than three of you men together and you all turn into little boys."

Still irritated with Scott, Mike, and Eric, Ian snorted. "All I think it proves is that we're going a bit stir-crazy cooped up in this hotel." He looked out the room's window. Outside a bright sun reflected off the steel and glass of the nearby buildings. "I would love to get out of here."

"True," Scott soberly reflected. "It was better when we were in the tunnels. At least there we had space." He shifted to face Ian. "Any chance Wanda could get us out of here, even for a little bit?"

An evil grin began to spread across Ian's face. "So now you want my help? Huh, should have thought of that before the insults."

Scott tried to look innocent. "Mike started it."

"Hey," defended Mike, "I was telling the truth. Sarah says all the signs are there."

A new voice came from the doorway. "What signs? Is something wrong with little Tim?"

They all turned to see Wanda in the doorway to the room. Her eyes were on Mike, a slightly worried frown on her face.

"Busted," mouthed Scott.

"Uh, no worries there Wanda, Tim is doing fine," answered Mike, who was looking at his plate of food and doing a terrible job at keeping a straight face. Scott continued to snicker in the background.

Wanda looked about, clearly trying to make sense of the conversation she had walked in on. Sighing, Ian said, "It's nothing, Wanda. I'm just putting up with some overly stupid suggestions from everyone."

A little distracted, Wanda replied, "Oh." Her earlier worries about the group's newest member apparently mollified, she entered the room. Ian noticed she was lugging along her book bag. When she sat down next to him, he could tell the satchel had once again bloated in volume from more of her notes.
Scott saw Wanda's bag as well and asked, "Wanda you still digging into all that Sumerian history?"

Ian saw her shoulders slump. "I'm trying," she said with a weary glance at her book bag, "when time allows. But I've been busy meeting with many in Chicago." Turning her attention to Scott, she added, "It doesn't help when much of your history and mythology from that time is hopelessly convoluted and muddled."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, Wanda," replied Scott with a shrug. "I'm by no means an expert on ancient Babylon. I don't know much about that statue you found." He stopped and pondered for a moment. "I mean winged creatures, like angels and demons, are common myths in any number of our cultures."

Eric, who had been listening, asked, "What's this about a statue?"

"I'll show you," answered Ian. He pulled her satchel open and saw Wanda had indeed added to her growing collection of books and papers. Rummaging around her pulled out the original history book which had started Wanda's quest. He turned it to the correct page and showed Eric the picture of the disturbing statue. Glancing to Wanda, he said softly, "Wanda says this looks like a Vulture."

Eric studied the page silently. Curious, Mike came up and looked over the other man's shoulder. His face turned confused. "Doesn't look like a bird to me."

Ian shook his head and started to explain to Mike. "No, the Souls gave the name 'Vulture' to a race of aliens who came to their home world a long time ago. The name had more to do with their nature than how they appeared."

Still puzzled, Mike asked, "Their nature? What's that mean?"

"They were very cruel and unkind to us when they came to Origin," said Wanda softly. Her voice had gone to a near whisper, her eyes distant, lost deep in her inherited memories. "I've heard a few Souls talk about the Vultures," said Scott. "They always say the same thing - they were cruel and unkind. But they never go into any detail."

A little tremor went through Wanda, a look of distress rising up on her pale face. So unlike Wanda's normal serene mood that everyone, except Ian, looked at her in alarm. Ian put his arm around her and gave her a comforting hug.

"It's not easy for them to talk about," explained Ian as he held Wanda. "Souls inherit memories from their mothers. It's kind of hard for us Humans to understand. Think of it like seeing a movie of someone's life, the memories aren't yours, but they are a part of you. Stronger memories, usually the more intense ones, get passed down from one generation of Souls to the next. So after a while the very old memories handed down are either really good or..."

"Very bad," finished Wanda. She let out a long exhale. She gave Ian a quick peck on his cheek and wiggled out of his embrace. "On Origin we lived in peace and harmony for a very long time. We never knew an act of cruelty or betrayal. Then the Vultures came. At first, we were fascinated by them. We thought of them as strange new friends...but they did not see us that way. They would prey on our original hosts. Amuse themselves by hurting and killing them.

Another strong shudder went through Wanda. "And with us Souls, they would do...unspeakable things."

Ian wrapped his arm back around Wanda, not drawing her in, but giving her a steadying hand of support. "From what Wanda has told me, I think the Vultures used to hunt the Souls' host race for
sport. Then sometimes they would…umm…cook and eat the remains.

Looking up, Ian saw everyone else in the room was staring wide-eyed at the two of them, clearly horrified. "And you think," said Mike, pointing to the disturbing little sculpture in the history book, "somehow a human saw one of these Vultures things and made a statue of it?"

"I don't know," groaned a dishearten Wanda. "The statue of this 'Pazuzu' is simple in form, but it does have a passing resemblance to a grown Vulture." Weary, she slumped in her chair. "Maybe this all just coincidence." She patted her overstuffed book bag. "I've been looking through additional books with more of your mythological creatures, none of the rest really match."

"Make perfect sense to me," said Eric as he excitedly tapped the edge of the history book. "This is full on Chariots of the Gods stuff here."

Wanda's forehead wrinkled in confusion at Eric's strange enthusiastic response. "Chariots of what?"

"Oh," groaned Scott. His eyes rolled contemptuously. "Not this again. It's a bunch of nonsense about Ancient Astronauts, Aliens building the pyramids, and where to find Atlantis."

Eric shot out of his seat, nearly knocking his food and laptop to the floor. "It's not nonsense," he bit back crossly. With an overdramatic wave towards Wanda he continued, "cause you know, there's an alien sitting right here."

"That's hardly means anything," said Scott as he shook his head dismissively. "Just because the Souls are here now doesn't mean every cave painting from the stone age which looks vaguely like a modern day airplane has to be the work of aliens."

Apparently this was an old argument between the two men. A little sigh worked its way out of Wanda. "I'm sorry," she said to both Scott and Eric, "but I don't know what you mean by 'Chariots of the Gods' and 'Ancient Astronauts.' Could you possibly please explain?"

Sitting back down, Eric firmly nodded and Scott just scoffed and crossed his arms. "Wanda," answered Eric, "I will enlighten you."

"You see," said Eric as he shifted into his haughty lecturing mode which most people found to be rather irritating. "In 1968, an author by the name of Erich von Däniken wrote a book called 'Chariots of the Gods.' In it, he hypothesized throughout humanity's history there was evidence of influence upon ancient cultures from a much more advanced people. From Stonehenge to the Nazca Lines. Someone capable of sophisticated machines, impressive medical knowledge, and highly developed mathematics and science were teaching and shaping our earliest civilizations. von Däniken believed these mystery people must have been extraterrestrials."

Eric put on a face of fake confusion for Wanda. "But there's nothing in our history where we meet aliens. The first aliens we've met are the Souls." He looked around the gathered group with a smug smile. "Not something we're soon going to forget, eh?"

Blank stares from everyone was the only response.

Unperturbed, Eric went on. "But, would primitive man know what an alien was? They lacked understanding of the universe at large. Other races? On other planets? It would be incomprehensible to some goat herder who saw a UFO land. Instead, humans would put such encounters with aliens in the only context they knew."

Wanda had patiently listened to Eric overly dramatic explanation so far. Now she interrupted.
"Context, what do you mean?"

"Wanda, when we see one of your shuttles or starships we understand, at least in principle, what it is and what it does. But that's because we've built airplanes and spaceships of our own, we have something to reference. What would happen if a primitive human saw your spaceships land and one of those aliens you call a...umm...a..."

"Spider," offered Wanda helpfully. "But I still don't see your point."

"Of course not," replied an insufferable Eric, "I haven't made it yet."

Ian understood where Eric was going with his speech. He had heard all of this before from Jeb. The old man loved just about any far out theory and had been more than eager to share with anyone who would listen before Wanda had stumbled her way into the caves. Oddly enough, Jeb never expounded these theories with Wanda. Apparently having a real alien to talk to beat any of his off-the-wall ideas about ancient extraterrestrial visitations.

"Wanda, it's like this," broke in Ian. Hopefully, he could move this along faster than Eric's long-winded account. "Prehistoric Humans would have seen a flying spaceship as something magical, not as a machine. And an alien who got out and walked around would be unlike anything they knew. Capable of acts no mere human could do. So they would think these visitors were gods."

"And the spaceship which transported the alien would be the chariot," said Wanda in slowly growing realization. "Gods and chariots, terms early humans could understand."

"Exactly," confirmed Ian.

"Your Sumerians and their scary little statue are a perfect example," said Eric without missing a beat from Ian finishing his explanation. Eagerly he leaned forward in his seat, his whole body practically bouncing with enthusiasm.

"The Sumerians are one of our oldest civilizations. Now what's interesting is before they started their nation, they were just a bunch of primitive hunter-gather tribes. No sophistication whatsoever. Then all of a sudden they go from building little mud huts to building whole cities. They had writing, mathematics, advanced understanding of astronomy, and architecture and agriculture way ahead of their time. But most importantly the Sumerians record how it happened. They say their 'gods' taught them. Made them what they were. And they called their gods the Annunaki, which literally translates to 'Those who came from the heavens to earth.'"

"It's still all nonsense," said Scott with a tired sigh after Eric had completed his lecture. "That author, von Däniken, was regularly shown to be lying or exaggerating about his so-called 'evidence.'"

Scott indicated Wanda's book bag. "You've seen how complicated it is to figure out what happened thousands of years ago. Writings get translated, retranslated, and mistranslated. Unfortunately, we don't inherit any memories like the Souls. Our past isn't immutable. Stuff get lost and distorted over time. What Eric's saying about the Sumerians is just one interpretation, there could be any number of much more likely explanations."

Eric started to interject, but Scott pressed his point. "What I'm saying is this - trying to prove anything with an old statue with our inconsistent and error prone history is just going to run you around in circles."

Ian could tell Wanda was deep in thought, considering both men's arguments. Mike, who stood
listening to their conversation with a slightly muddled expression, interrupted the silence. "So what you're saying is these Vultures came to Earth a long time ago and taught the Sumerians stuff, like buildings and writing? And then down the line, some guy makes a statue of one of them?"

"It's possible," replied Eric. "If this Pazuzu figurine is actually based on people seeing a Vulture." Pausing in thought, he rubbed his chin. "Maybe that's why it only sorts of looks like a Vulture to Wanda. The sculptor didn't see the alien himself but was described to him by someone else who had. Or this sculpture is a copy of some even older work."

"But you said the Sumerians called the aliens their gods," said Kate. Pointing to the picture of the possible Vulture, she questioned Eric's theory. "The book says this guy was a demon. How does that work?"

"Well," considered Eric, "maybe over time the Vultures started abusing the Sumerians. Just like they did on Wanda's planet."

"I don't know, sounds like your reaching," stated Mike with a shake of his head.

Eric was not to be deterred. "No, think about," he said, "this likely didn't happen overnight. The Vultures could have been interacting with people in that area for years, centuries even. One generation's gods could have become another's demons."

"There is a problem with your theories, Eric," said Wanda, finally breaking her silence. "While this statue is old, our interactions with the Vultures took place much further in the past. We had assimilated their entire race before your kind were even around."

"Could Souls have come here in the distant past? As Vultures?" asked Kate.

Wanda shook her head. "No, we didn't learn about Earth until much more recently." An unpleasant frown appeared twisting her lips. "And we explored the stars as our spider selves...not as Vultures."

Ian was about to ask Wanda what had happened to the Vulture's race. Did her people, after all this time, still use them as hosts? Souls were always talking about the other planets and other races they had inhabited, but no one ever talked about being a Vulture. But before he could, Jason stuck his head around the door.

"Hey, Ian and Wanda," broke in Jason, "Marc and Bright Moon are back for their visit with the Seekers. Something big is going down."

Ian could feel Wanda stiffen next to him. Alarmed, she asked, "What's happened?"

"I don't know," said Jason with half-formed shrug. "But Marc really wants to talk to both of you."

"Alright," agreed Wanda, "we'll be there in a moment." She retrieved her history book from the table and returned it to her book bag. "This has been...interesting," she told Eric. "We can speak on this later?"


As Ian and Wanda left the room, Eric was still twittering away on his ideas about aliens throughout history. "This will be an excellent opportunity to watch Stanly Kubrick's 2001," announced Eric. "The first fifteen minutes of the movie are a perfect example of what I've been talking about."

Everyone else in the room let out a loud groan.
Melanie remained absolutely still as Madison Brinsfield brought in the tray of food. She sat on the cot in her tiny makeshift cell. Trying to make herself look non-threatening. Setting the plate down on the tiled floor, Madison's distrustful eyes never left her for even a moment. Glancing down at the offered food, Melanie saw meal was of two protein bars and some dried fruit. Just like yesterday. And the day before that.

"Madison," said Melanie in a voice soft enough to be considered a whisper, "listen to me. What Williams told you isn't the truth. He's lying."

Madison had been slowly backing out, still eyeing when Melanie had spoken. The other woman stiffened but didn't stop her exit.

"Please," begged Melanie. "I promise you I've not been brainwashed and turned into some type of collaborator for the Souls."

Madison paused at the doorway to Melanie's little cell. Her expression was impossible to read. "I've read your file from the Seekers. You really did take control back of your body and head out into the desert, didn't you?"

Surprised Madison was finally talking to her, Melanie quickly began speaking. "Not exactly, I kind of spoon feed bits of my memories to Wanda. I basically talked her into it."

"Wanda?" questioned Madison.

"Short for Wanderer," explained Melanie.

A scowl appeared almost instantaneously on Madison's face. "You gave the parasite who ruled your body a nickname?"

"Not me, my uncle did," replied Melanie.

She started to explain how Uncle Jeb had slowly acclimated both Wanda and the other Humans to each other when Madison angrily interrupted. "You became friends with it? How in the hell is that possible?"

"Look, I know it hard to believe. A Soul wanting to help Humans. But it's true, and what's more, there are other Souls like her. Trying to help us."

"Seekers lie," sneered Madison. She tapped her temple with a finger. "I ought to know."

Melanie actually managed an unamused laugh. "Trust me, Wanda is no Seeker. She still sucks at lying."

"No, she's worse than a Seeker. I know what happened," said Madison. Her voice grew calm and soft, just like a Soul. "They are all things good; compassionate, patient, honest, virtuous, and full of love. The perfect little species. Everyone should be like them. This Wanda had you thinking they were right to invade us."

"It's not like that," shot back Melanie. "I'm not trying to excuse what the Souls did to us. And Wanda knows they were wrong."
"Oh, how magnanimous of her! She thought the genocide of our race might be bad! Truly Wanda is a gift to our people," mocked Madison.

"Wanda freed me and she helped us time and again," defended Melanie. "She's a good person."

"It's not a person!" yelled Madison. "Not your Wanda, not any of them!" She was quite literally shaking with rage. Her arms tight at her side and her hands balled into fists.

"Madison, I'm sorry," said Melanie desperately, hoping she had not ruined her chance to convince the woman she was not a threat. But it was too late.

"Enjoy your food, traitor," snarled Madison from outside the cell. The door slammed shut a second later with enough force to rattle even Melanie's bed on the other side of the room.

Melanie hung her head and let out an annoyed curse. That could have gone better. Anger towards the Souls was easy to understand, Melanie knew that. But Madison's fury was so complete, she was utterly enraged at the idea Melanie had made friends with Wanda. It made her wonder what had happened to the woman.

Waiting till she heard the sounds of Madison storming away, Melanie got off her cot. Taking a few steps to her tray of food she picked it up with a grimace. The protein bars did not offer much in the way of taste, but she was hungry enough to eat it anyway.

When she was finished, Melanie went back to what she had been doing before she heard Madison's footsteps coming down the hallway. Namely, trying to break out of her cell. She guessed the small room she was being held in had at one time been some sort of storage room. Only a modest metal door stood between her and freedom. The door and its accompanying lock seemed sturdy enough, but there was no deadbolt. If she could manage to pry open or break off the doorknob she could get at the lock and open the door.

A small Plexiglas window was framed in the upper portion of the door. Melanie took a few moments to peer out into the hallway beyond to make sure she was alone. Usually about once an hour someone would come by and look in on her, but beyond that her captors did not seem to have either the time or manpower to monitor her constantly.

Melanie reflected in disappointment how to break open a door had never been one of the skills she learned while she and Jamie were on the run. The Souls hardly ever locked doors or used security devices, they simply saw little need. It had made her break-ins too easy.

Sitting down next to the door, Melanie began to work. All she had was the bent end of one the hinges she had managed to remove from her cot. Twisting the thin piece of metal in her hand, she tried to pry off the metal plate connecting the knob to the door. In a way, it was lucky Madison had gotten so angry with her. The woman had not noticed the scratches where Melanie had been trying to force it open.

She spent the better part of the next fifteen minutes playing with the door to no avail. Throwing down her pathetic would-be crowbar, she jumped up and kicked the door in the frustration.

"Ow!" Melanie groaned in pain. "That was stupid," she muttered to herself. She needed a better plan. What would Jared do? He could likely break the door down. She might even be able to manage it; the door was not that strong. But it would take her time and be very noisy.

Thinking about Jared started a pang of worry in Melanie. She had not seen him or Kyle since Williams had taken them away. Williams insisted none of them would be hurt. They were
insurance to help him save the world, he had said. Whatever that meant.

"Jared, please be safe," she prayed out in a faint whisper.

So what to do? She had been over every square inch of her prison. There were no windows, air duct far too small to crawl through, and all the walls were made out of solid cinder blocks. No, the only way out was through the door. She just needed to think of a better plan.

Sitting down next to the door for what felt like the hundredth time, she looked it over. The door opened outward, the hinges were on the other side where she could not get at them. The Plexiglas could be broken, but it was far too small to get through. It was also high enough up she could not reach through and down to the doorknob on the other side. And trying to pry the handle off wasn't working either.

Leaning in close, Melanie examined where the door met the frame. She could just make out where the latch bolt of the door connected to the hole in the strike plate. Picking up her crude tool, she began twisting it back and forth in the tiny crack between the door and jamb. Even as thin as the hinge was it was too thick to move freely in the space in-between. But by flexing it left and right her primitive lock picking tool began to force its way in. The door was not so heavy or secure that a little bit of levering could not be managed.

She felt more than saw it touch the edge of the bolt. If she could just manage to push back on the latch, she would be able to turn the doorknob and open the door. Pressing as hard as she could, Melanie wiggled the broken piece of metal in an attempt to force the lock to move.

"Damn it," she cursed as tried her best but the latch would not move.

By now the piece of the hinge from the cot was so twisted and bent it scarcely looked like the original thin metal strap. Where she had forced it into the doorjamb it had even begun to split at the center, from the weight of the door. One side twisted up and the other curved a little to the right.

Smiling, Melanie turned her simple tool over in her hand and once again began to wiggle it into the narrow space between door and frame. This time, she felt the bolt give a little. The right side curve helped catch on the latch. She pressed harder and it gave a little bit more.

"Com'on…" she hissed as she leaned her entire body into forcing the lock open.

Finally, at long last, she felt latch push back. Holding it in place with one hand, Melanie reached down with her other hand and grabbed the doorknob. Her hand was shaking from both her exertion and excitement.

The doorknob turned with a faint click and door opened.

"Yes!" cried Melanie.

She wanted to whoop for joy and yell in triumph of her accomplishment. But she clamped down on jubilation. She now needed to be silent and very careful. Who knew how many people were here or what they would do with her if they found her out of her cell.

Keeping low, she moved down the hallway. Hopefully she could find Jared and Kyle and get the hell out of here before she was found missing. She passed two doors, each one of them she determined was empty after a very quick glance inside.

The hallway ended at double doors which opened into a large garage. After looking about, Melanie
concluded it was the same garage they had been brought originally. Apparently she had not been moved very far at all. One of the Seeker patrol cars was gone, but the other remained. On the other side of the garage was the cramped manager's office where she had first met Williams.

Hot, dry air hit her face as moved into the garage. Smells of engine oil and gas drifted in the sweltering space. Creeping forward, Melanie began to make her way towards the office when she heard raised voices. Immediately she hunkered down, hiding behind a stack of tires and other tools.

At first, she could not make out what was being said, just the rise and lowering of two people arguing. She debated about closing the distance to the office to better hear what was being said. But it became pointless as the two people arguing stormed out of the office.

She immediately recognized Craig Williams. He was dressed in a normal pair of jeans and a polo shirt. Not the Seeker ensemble she had seen him wear before. He looked like he had just gotten back from being out in the hot sun. The other man she did not know. He was tall with a slender build, dark eyes, and a deep frown etched on his face.

"Would you relax!" shouted Williams to the other man. "We're keeping up appearances. Hell, we're even sending fake reports to neighboring cities and they're buying it!"

"It doesn't matter a damn about LA if the Seekers take out the Facility. The buggers have already found the safehouse and they're closing in. We are not ready!" fired back the other man.

Williams looked incredibly exasperated. "Smith, what more do we need? Let's move on LAX and kick start this little revolution of ours."

"It's Asag," complained the man named Smith, "he's sick."

"Of course he's sick," answered Williams disdainfully. "Asag is old. He's ancient. It's amazing any of them are still going."

"He says he needs more time to get the program done," argued Smith.

Williams sighed with a loud exhale. "Then by all means, let's get our scary benefactor finished before he ups and dies on us. We need his knowledge more than we need his life."

"I don't want to be the one who has to go back and explain to Alex or… Paz about why one them died while under my command," said Smith. He seemed to almost deflate and shrink within himself as he spoke.

With a tired shake of his head, Williams replied, "That's not my problem. I've got my people ready. The longer we drag this out, the more likely we lose control. So let's get on with it."

Then they broke apart. Both of them seemingly still fuming. The one called Smith marched away to a steel door. Before opening it, he put on a large set of sunglasses. Opening the door bright sunlight streamed in from the outside, illuminated Melanie. She gasped as she realized her hiding spot was now brightly revealed. If Smith turned around he would easily see her. But he did not. He went through the door and it slammed shut.

Darkness returned and Melanie's head spun as she tried to make sense of what she had just overheard. Who was Asag? What was he doing? She guessed LAX meant the Los Angeles Airport. What were Williams and Smith planning to do there?

But cutting her bewilderment was the sound of Williams speaking. Glancing back Melanie saw he
talking into a blocky handheld radio. What she heard him say next had her blood go cold and made her shiver despite the heat.

"Madison," said Williams into his radio, "bring Melanie Stryder to me. We're nearly ready and I need to keep her close."
Blindsided

Only a few Souls traveled on the white and black checkerboard floor of O'Hare Airport's Terminal One. Most were heading through to other concourses and gates in the airport. Waiting for them would be quick and efficient shuttle flights taking them to anywhere around the globe. The relative emptiness made it easy for the Seekers who stood watch over the small group of mostly Humans.

Seeker Owen watched as Marc Walters spoke to his gathered people and a few of his allied Souls. There was an amiable mood to the Humans. But Owen though he could sense a sad undertone to the tiny crowd. One of their own was leaving. Going, as Owen had heard one of the Humans say, right into the belly of the beast. But Marc seemed determined to make his departure a happy one. He laughed and joked with some, hugged a few others, and kept their spirits high.

"I wish he would hurry up," grumbled Seeker Amber Rains. She stood next to Owen, watching the Humans with an expression of casual annoyance. She checked the clock and shook her head. "It's nearly time to go."

Owen stepped closer to the little group. Unlike some of the other Seekers apprehensively guarding the Humans, he was not worried about them becoming hostile. After coming all this way, he did not believe they were going to suddenly turn on them. The Humans had been through many searches before being allowed to see Marc off. While they irritably protested, they did cooperate. Some amount of paranoia could be prudent, but Owen was starting to suspect many of his associates were becoming unreasonably suspicious about everything. He had seen it more and more as the Seekers rallied together to confront the humans behind the 'Facility.' It was not a winning strategy in Owen's opinion. If you tried to be hyper sensitive to every threat, you ultimately became ineffective. You spread yourself too thin, and you lost the ability to focus on anything.

Clearing his throat, Owen spoke to Marc. "We do need to get going."

Marc nodded. "Right Chief, just one moment."

He turned to faced a young woman, her curly waves of blonde hair framed around her face almost like a halo. Owen had listened to her talks several times in the past few days. He found her stories about her life with the rebel humans quite fascinating. Still, something about her presence here bothered him.

Bending down to look her straight in the eye, Marc began softly, "Wanda..."

"I know," said Wanda to Marc's unasked request, "I promise to keep everyone safe."

"Counting on it," replied Marc as he stood back up. He looked to his traveling companion, Bright Moon on Fallen Snow, and asked, "You ready?"

She stood apart from the gathered Humans, looking a little awkward as Marc had said his goodbyes. "Yes, I'm ready."

"Wait," said someone in the group. The tiny crowd parted, and now Owen did feel a rise of foreboding as he saw who had interrupted. Mia was small and hardly looked like she would be a physical threat. Yet rumors among the Seekers about this girl and what she was were rampant.

Mia approached Bright Moon. Her dark eyes watchful as she scrutinized the Seeker. Bright Moon
stood very still. After a few seconds of consideration, Mia ordered - "You keep him safe," while pointing to Marc.

"I will," promised Bright Moon.

"Okay then..." Mia hesitated again, bouncing from one foot to another. Then in a rush, she blurted out, "You stay safe too and come back to us."

Bright Moon was visibly taken aback by the girl's wish for her safety. It took the Seeker a moment to find her voice. When she did speak her voice was still uneven. "I-I will...T-Thank you, Mia."

A smile widened across Mia's face. Her white teeth stood out in contrast to her darker olive skin. To Owen, her grin looked more than a little smug. Apparently she enjoyed seeing Bright Moon in uncomfortable confusion.

"That girl, Mia," muttered Amber Rains as she came to stand beside Owen and watch the Humans. "I find her very disturbing."

"I have heard the stories," he replied.

"I was there at the hospital," said Amber Rain, keeping her voice low. "I saw her eyes change. She posses one of us inside her."

Owen nodded slowly. Keeping his voice at a whisper, "As I understand it, the girl is the result of some egregious experiment. The Soul is fused to her Human brain."

"She is some sort of freakish hybrid," stated Amber Rains with an unhappy shake of her head. "All these Humans...they are simply atrocious," she decried. "And now we relying on this Marc Walters to help us?"

"I take it you do not approve of the long term plans for these Humans," questioned Owen.

Amber Rains went silent, apparently deep in thought over his question. Finally, she offered, "Their population will need to be kept to a manageable size. Their actions tightly controlled. And, of course, they will need to relocate to somewhere...more appropriate. Too many in the city are bothered by their presence."

Owen studied the assembled group as Marc and Bright Moon started off for their departure gate. He noticed a tall Human with dark hair standing next to Wanda. One of his arm around her waist, the other held high as he waved goodbye. "What about those of us who have chosen to partner with these Humans?"

The sound coming from Amber Rain's throat was not really a retch, but it was evident she was not happy with the idea. "I suppose they will have to learn to live with their choices," she said dismissively and began following after Marc and Bright Moon.

Owen studied the gathered Humans one last time. The remaining Seekers were leading them back down the terminal. Back to the safety of their home. None of them appeared to be vicious monsters. They too were appalled by what had happened to Mia and now were willing to stand with the Seekers against their own kind.

"But what does that say about us, when some of our own kind would rather live with the Humans than in our society?" asked Owen.

Amber was already down the concourse and did not hear him. Hurrying after her, Owen was not
sure if he agreed about sending the Humans away. When listening to Wanda speak she had seemed so sincere about the idea Humans and Souls could work together. But his private contemplation quickly came to an end as he heard sounds of Bright Moon pleading with Marc.

Both stood in the waiting area for their assigned flight. The Human's previous jovial mood had completely vanished. Now he was agitatedly pacing among the rows of empty seats. A few others Seekers, already here for their flight, watched warily as Marc moved about.

"Marc," Owen heard Bright Moon say, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," replied the Human as he continued to stride back and forth. He was like caged animal. Feeling anxious as he came to a stop before the arguing couple, Owen wondered if Marc would become violent after all.

"Please," prompted Bright Moon as she laid a hand gently on Marc's arm. "What's bothering you?"

Her words and touch had the desired effect. Marc let out a deep sigh and stopped his pacing. He glanced fretfully at the door leading to the gangway connecting to the departing shuttle.

"I've never flown anywhere before," admitted Marc.

Bright Moon blinked in confusion. Shaking her head slowly, she asked, "Why would using a shuttle distress you? There's nothing to worry about."

"I happen to believe if we Humans were meant to fly we would have evolved wings," answered Marc with a frown.

Again Bright Moon twisted her head back and forth in confusion. "In your people's time, your aircraft were one of the safest ways to travel. And our shuttles are even more reliable."

"Well that makes me feel so much better when the wings fall off, and we plummet to our deaths," argued Marc sarcastically.

Growing exasperated Bright Moon replied, "You are completely unreasonable."

"Unreasonable? I'm unreasonable?" quipped Marc. "Bri, I could give you a list a mile long about stuff I've had to do in the last few days that I find unreasonable."

Upon Marc's use of his nickname for her, Bright Moon scowled. "Well, Human, I'm so sorry that efficient travel frightens you."

A fierce grin twisted Marc's lips. He leaned in towards her. His voice went flat with subdued intimidation. "I could have just stolen one of your patrol cars and made the trip by now for all the song and dance everyone had to go through to get out of the hotel to see us off."

Bright Moon leaned in as well, her jaw tightening. "Oh no, no more vehicle theft for you. You promised."

"Did I?" snorted Marc in reply.

Even as the two argued, Owen could not help but noticed how both Marc and Bright Moon had moved closer to each other. It was like they were two planets caught in each other's gravitational pull. And it was quickly becoming apparent both were so caught up with each other they had not noticed the flight was now boarding.
"Excuse me!" Amber Rains hotly interrupted the squabbling couple. The Seeker bobbed her head, incredulous. "But we're leaving now."

Both Bright Moon and Marc stopped arguing and looked around sheepishly. Everyone else waiting at the gate had already formed up into an orderly column. Heading through the door and down the gangway to the waiting shuttle, apparently eager to get away from their bickering.

With a long sigh and a sad shake of his head, Marc began walking towards the door. Bright Moon went with him. Both holding each other's hands.

Watching Human-Soul couple head through the gateway, Amber Rains was still shaking her head disapprovingly. Starting after them, she muttered, "Utterly insane."

"If I didn't know better," remarked Owen as he followed, "I would say those two liked arguing with each other."

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On the day Craig Williams turned eighteen, he had gone directly to the local recruiter office and signed up for the Marines. It was a long two months wait until he left for boot camp. His mother had cried over the idea of her only son leaving home, but for Craig, it was long past time. As for his father...well, that drunk was hardly around to care.

Boot camp had been relatively easy for Craig. Mostly it was just following instructions. A lot of 'Yes, Drill Sergeant' and 'No, Drill Sergeant.' Plenty of repetitive exercises, miles of running. He was a natural fit for the military life. Do as you are told. Fight who we tell you to fight. Kill on command. It would shape his life for nearly the next twenty years.

After making it through basic and receiving his first assignment, Craig found he had a lot of spare time. Without many other options, he had taken to watching the base's boxing team. It was not long before he asked to join. Figuring he had been in plenty of fights as a kid. And from his father he knew how to take a beating. So to Craig, it was a natural choice. He had just assumed he would be good at it.

But his first time in the ring against someone more experienced had been a quick and brutal lesson. Knocked flat on his ass. Laying there on the mat with his head aching and vision blurry, he tried to make sense of what had happened.

Coming fuzzily into his view was the old drill sergeant who had taken to teaching him. The man's gnarled face had broken into a grin. "It's that hidden arm. Always gets you young pups."

Craig had tried to make sense of his confusing words. Still feeling dizzy he had given up and asked the sergeant, "The hidden arm?"

The saying was an old boxing term his trainer explained. As he had helped Craig off the ground, he said, "It's the hit you never see coming."

Sitting in his makeshift office, he absently wondered what had happened to that dusty old Brown Round. In Craig's youth the man had seemed ancient, but in truth that drill sergeant had likely been as old as Craig was now. Was he still alive? With a parasite in his head and a silly, dopey smile on his face?

No, not very likely, thought Craig. That old marine would have gone down swinging when the
Souls came a call'en.

That brought him back to the young woman seated in the nearby chair. Melanie Stryder had not gone down easily either when the Seekers had her trapped. Threw herself down an elevator shaft in a desperate bid for a final escape. He had to respect that type of bravery. It was far better than his capture by the Souls. It had been the hit he had never seen coming.

Even after her capture and insertion, she had fought the Soul who controlled her body and mind. Again she had fared far better than Craig had against Pale Light Gleaming. Until the Doctors of the Facility had cut him open and sliced and diced his brain he had been completely under the parasites control. However, Craig had learned much in the last few months. He was quite certain Melanie had an advantage when it came to resisting the Souls. A birthright she did not even know she possessed. And if he was right about Melanie, then Smith, and by extension, the Vultures would be very interested in her.

Melanie sat across from him, glaring with open hostility. She had been pale and sweaty when Madison had brought her in a few minutes before. Looking like she was ready to strangle someone. Craig had to admit he had not handled their unexpected reunion several days ago as well as he could have. Melanie and her companions had blundered their way right into the middle of his work to capture the remaining Seekers in the city. Already a dangerous mission, their presence added one too many variables. Given their brief past interaction, it was entirely possible she might try to disrupt his plans. He had needed to keep them contained.

Craig let out a little sigh. Too late to fix their past, better to focus on the future. Was that not the whole point of his plans? Building a better future for the humans who could survive the coming apocalypse. He tried a little smile with Melanie and said, "I realize we didn't get off on the right foot. That's my fault. Hopefully, we can work to improve things."

She was not buying it. Melanie twisted her head back and forth, a riled movement of her body's anger. Glowering, she spat back, "I don't have a damn thing to say to you till I see Jared and Kyle."

Putting up his hands in a sign of mock surrender, Craig kept his voice calm. "They're going to be here in just a moment. I promised I'd keep you three safe and I meant it."

Melanie scowled. "Why?" she scoffed angrily. "Because we're going to help you save the world?"

He eyed the raven-haired, hazel-eyed woman. What he had planned for Melanie was risky. Smith would be back soon, and he needed a good distraction for the Director. With Smith already busy with the preparations for their upcoming raid, adding one more concern would hopefully be enough to let Craig make his move. How Melanie would respond to being used as bait was an open question. There was the possibility after she learned the whole truth she would understand. See the necessity of what he was doing...If she survived.

"More or less," he replied with a simple shrug.

"Terrorist stuff?" She questioned. "Going to blow up some more buildings or something?"

Tension tugged at him. Shaking his head, Craig said gravely, "The game has changed, Melanie. More than you can imagine."

A silence stretched out between them. He could see the curiosity in her eyes, she wanted to know more but held back. Coming as a welcome interruption, the door to the garage swung open and Madison Brinsfield and Joe Tanner lead Jared Howe and Kyle O'Shea through the threshold. Keeping up appearances both of his operatives were dressed in the usual black uniform of the
Seeker, including sidearms. But Melanie was wholly focused on the tall golden-haired man. In a blink of an eye she was out of the chair and wrapping her arms around Jared.

Jared was quite surprised to see her but was quick to recover and pulled her close to his chest. "Ah Mel," he breathed as he squeezed her tight. Then they pulled apart just enough to kiss passionately. This went on long enough for everyone else in the room to feel a tad uncomfortable. Craig cleared his throat loudly enough to make it clear the two love birds needed to end their make out session. They, at last, broke their kiss, however, Jared remained to hold Melanie close, acting as her protector.

Standing to the other side, Kyle asked with a sly grin, "Hey, no hug for me?"

Melanie shifted to Kyle, giving him a warm smile. "Are you alright? No one has hurt you?"

"They're fine," broke in Madison irritably. "Unlike some, we're not out to hurt our own kind."

Melanie let out a tired groan and turned back to Craig. "Would you tell her I'm not some sort of brainwashed spy for the Seekers!"

Craig was prepared for this. Yes, he had flexed the truth a bit with the others about Melanie and her friends. At the time, it had been necessary to get his team to quickly isolate the three intruders. While she might not be actually brainwashed, it was evident to him Melanie had gotten a little too attached to the Soul name Wanderer. But the other two, Jared and Kyle, could be a different story. He had time before Smith arrived to find out. Pulling out the latest issue of the LA Times, he handed over to Melanie.

Her eyes narrowed at the offered newspaper. "What's this?"

"Read the front page," responded Craig.

Melanie unfurled the paper and began to scan over the article. Jared and Kyle looked over her should and started reading as well. Kyle's head quickly snapped up as he saw the headline.

"Wild Humans in Chicago cooperating with Seeker Task Force," said Kyle, repeating the title of the article. His face contorted into bewildered anger. "What the hell!?" he demanded.

"This is the inevitable outcome of Marc Walters idiotic attempt to survive in a city full of Souls," explained Craig matter-of-factually.

Continuing to scrutinize the paper, Melanie started reading aloud -

"Seeker Sage of Tides reports substantial progress in locating the base of operations for a secret group of Humans collectively know as the 'Facility.' These savages are believed responsible for the terrorist attacks on the city of Chicago several months ago. Since their incursion, the Seekers have been working relentlessly to find and eliminate their threat.

Most remarkably, Sage of Tides credits the breakthrough to the willing assistance of a small group of Wild Humans recently captured at the Hotel Rose. These Humans had been discovered to be infesting the city several months ago. Their leader, named Marc Walters..."

Melanie broke off and looked at Jared. "Marc's alive," she began, "maybe the rest are to..."

"Worried about your traitorous friends?" interrupted Madison with a disgusted look on her face.

"They weren't working for the Seekers," explained an exasperated Melanie. "Marc and the others
were secretly meeting with a few friendly Souls in the city, attempting to reach some sort of peace agreement. We know they were attacked by the Seekers but not much else."

She paused as she read more of the article, trying to make sense of what had happened. "Maybe...Maybe they didn't have a choice but to help..."

"Right," said Joe, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Cause we all know Seekers just sit you down and have a nice chat with you when they want to know something."

Madison added on, her anger beginning to flare. "The only reason they weren't turned into hosts was that they were already in the Seekers pocket." She glared at Melanie, "Just like you!"

"It wasn't like that" shot back Melanie. "Wanda and the other Souls were trying to protect us. Find a way to stop the Seekers from further attacks." She pointed an accusing finger at Madison and then to Craig. "We're only in this mess thanks to you. You crazy 'Facility' people are going to get us all killed."

"Oh really?" replied Madison, her voice lowering and her anger turning cold. "If wasn't for Mr. Williams here and his friends at this 'Facility' I'd still have that a miserable parasite controlling me. We all would. They're the ones saving us."

Melanie's eyes went wide as did Jared's and Kyle's. They had not suspected the truth, reasoned Craig. Thinking Madison and the others had come from the Facility itself, not realizing they were former hosts. It was an easy enough mistake to make. The Facility had wrapped itself in enough secrecy that few knew how strong it really was. The reality was the they were weak. Only having a handful of Humans who could fight. It was why Craig had to bootstrap an army together here in LA.

Jared was the first to recover. He looked between the two former Seekers and then focused on Craig. "That's what you're doing here, isn't? Removing Souls..." he paused, thinking it over. "You know how?"

Craig was silent as he weighed just how much to tell Jared. There was still a general wariness to the man, but underneath it was an intense curiosity. "We're not popping 'em out at the 217th connection, if that is what you mean," he answered. "Recovery takes too long, and success rates aren't very good."

"It's that black gas," surmised Kyle. He had turned to Madison with an odd look on his face. "You thought we were Souls when you surrounded us. So you blasted us with it."

"It's called CURE," answered Joe. "Quite the little miracle drug. Knocks out the Soul and puts the original human's conscious back in the driver's seat."

"Joe," warned Madison, "You shouldn't be telling them anything. They'll just want to run back to their masters..."

"We are not working for the Souls!" thundered Jared with a surprising surge of rage. He took a threatening step towards Joe and Madison. Automatically their hands slipping to their weapons. Their training by the Seekers still very much a part of them. Coming to a stop before them, Jared ranted on, apparently oblivious to the danger. "I lost my father and my brothers to fighting the Souls' invasion. I will never, ever, forgive them for that!"

"Jared," whispered Melanie hastily. She came up behind him, wrapping her hand around his. Trying to pull him back, away from the armed former Seekers. Jared resisted for a moment, still
angry until he noticed the effect he had on Madison and Joe. Taking a step back, he reigned in his anger and continued with a somewhat softer voice. "I don't know what this man has told you," said Jared as he indicated Craig, "but we are not in league with the Seekers."

"But you are working with the Souls," argued Madison.

"They're not some sort of hive mind," countered Melanie. "Souls are individuals. They do have differences in opinion. Some of them see what they did to us as wrong."

"Can't be many," said Joe with a slow shake of his head. "I know exactly how Seeker Rush thought. How they all think. Their race is a bunch of conformists. They all love to agree and get along with each other. So they're not going to have a lot of conflicting viewpoints." With a disgusted grunt, he added, "Their perfect little society wouldn't hold up if they did."

A look of genuine pain crossed Melanie's features. "I know, trust me, I know," she said soberly. "But they can change. Mine did. Wanda saw she was wrong and has been trying to help."

"Mel," interrupted Jared with a lamented sigh, "you know by Wanda's own admission she was a bit of a loner compared to the other Souls. Yes, some Souls can change, but there will be plenty who don't."

Melanie started to shake her head, to argue, but Jared pressed his point. "Wanda's plan in Chicago was always a bit of a long shot." He pointed to the newspaper. "Something has obliviously gone very wrong."

Craig thumped on his desk, attempting to bring the argument in check. Things were getting a little carried away and his time was running low. But in his estimation Jared Howe had all the makings of an excellent recruit. He was going to need survivors like Jared. People who could endure through the ending of the world. Who knew how to get things done. Smith and the others were too quick to dismiss these holdouts. Seeing them as either little more than a nuisance or at most collateral damage in their schemes. They wanted people beholden to them, obedient. And the dark truth to Facility was what they claimed they wanted was really what the Vultures wanted.

"Now look," Craig began, but was interrupted himself by his office door swinging open and Director Smith stepping in from the sweltering heat of the garage.

"Look, Williams," said Smith and then stopped as he saw Craig was hardly alone. He seemed to barely register Joe and Madison, and completely ignored Melanie and the others. Turning to him, Smith said, "We need to talk alone. Things are finally falling into place."

This was not exactly how Craig had things planned. He had hoped for more time. Having Jared and Kyle here might cause problems. But he could adapt. Keeping his emotion careful in check, Craig replied mildly, "Of course, but I've had a bit of a development of my own." He pointed to Melanie. "I believe she qualifies as unmodified genetic resistant."

Surprise radiated on Smith's face. He turned towards Melanie, seemingly seeing her for the first time. The girl, in turn, was giving the Director a very suspicious look. They overlapped as they asked the same question at almost the same time. "What are you talking about?"

"Her files from the Seekers indicated she able to wrestle control, at least temporarily, of her body from the controlling parasite," said Craig as he answered Smith's question. "By her own admission, she was able to manipulate her residing Soul to some degree."

"Really?" said Smith, intrigued. Then his face shifted into a confused glare. "Wait, who are these
people again? When were they converted?"

Now for the tricky bit. "They weren't," admitted Craig. "These three stumbled into our highway operation. We captured them and I've been interrogating them."

"What?" Smith turned to him, his bewilderment building. "That was three days ago! Why didn't you tell me!?"

It was then Melanie decided to drop a bombshell. Waving with an emphatic sweep of her hand, she spoke to Madison and Joe while pointing to both Facility men. "You don't understand who you're dealing with. What they're capable of. They launched a plague in Chicago, killed thousands. Humans or Souls didn't bother them one bit. Murdered a kid just so they could maneuver Humans and Souls to fight each other."

"And you," said Melanie with sad shake of her head to Craig. "You know what they did to you and to your daughter. You're so quick to blame the Souls. But you know she died because the Facility tried to capture her. And then they twisted you and the Soul in your head...Why the hell are you following them!?"

You could have heard a pin drop after Melanie was done. Madison and Joe just stared blankly at her, trying to make sense of her rant. Then all at once everyone was speaking, yelling over each other. Inwardly Craig fumed. He had never told any of his recruits about the truth of his recovery. The bound and gagged Soul named Pale Light Gleaming cauterized in the back of his head. Too risky to explain and he needed their trust. Better to let them think he was one them, not some screwed up lab rat the Facility doctors had gotten lucky with. But more importantly, she dared to bring up his Samantha. He could have snapped her neck for that.

"SHUT UP ALL OF YOU!" screamed Smith at the top of his lungs. His face was scarlet, and his hands were balled so tight they had already gone white. Shaking in a rage, he twisted and back in forth as he glared at everyone in Craig's office. "I don't know what's going on here! But I'm getting to the bottom of it now!"

"You two," he commanded to Madison and Joe. "Get those two men out of here now. I don't care where you put them. But keep them quiet until I have a chance to talk to them."

"And you two," he indicated Craig and Melanie, "are coming with me. I've got more than a few questions."

"You out of mind if you think I'm going anywhere with you," snarled Melanie.

Smith's face went very dark. His words were cold, so different from his explosion of anger just moments ago. "Madison, shoot one of these men."

Madison paled. "But there...human."

Smith pointed to Kyle, apparently at random. In a deadly calm voice, he ordered. "Shoot that man. Now."

"Hey hey," said Jared. His voice tight and yet at the same time calm. He put up his hands, palms out. Seeking for peace. "Nobody needs to kill anyone. We'll do as you say." He gave Melanie a long look, pleading as well comforting. "Mel, it's okay. Go with him."

"But..."

"No, it's going to be fine," said Jared with a smile that did not reach his eyes.
A twitter of giggles came from beyond the open doorway. Wanda, who was on her way to meet Ian, stopped and glanced into Mia's bedroom. A girl of about fourteen sat on the edge of the bed, her long auburn hair messily cascading into sloppy pigtails. Crouched behind her, Mia was working with a brush to untangle some of the longer strands.

"Com'on Mia," said Red Leaves Caught in the Wind, "let me have the mirror and see what you've done to my hair."

"Not done yet," answered Mia. "Still trying to get the kinks out." She examined with a critical eye the other girl's flaming red mane. "You have too much hair, Red. I should cut some of it off."

"No!" exclaimed the other girl. She jumped off the bed, her hands going to her head in an effort to protect her hair's length.

"Ah, you should try it," challenged Mia. She ran a hand through her much shorter hairstyle. "It's cooler, and you'll run faster when you lose all the weight from that mop on your head."

"My hair is not a mop," defended Red Leaves. "I like its length." She snatched a mirror off the bed and began to examine Mia's handiwork. Her face fell when she saw the atrocity of her managed hair.

Wanda ventured into the room, a smile widening on her face. Of everything that had happened in the last two weeks, the revelations about Mia where the strangest of paradoxes. What had been done to both the girl and her inhabiting Soul by the Facility was horrific. A grotesque twisting of medical science for reasons no one could fathom. It had resulted in Mia's central nervous system becoming merged with the alien Soul in her body. It had given the girl the bizarre ability to detect the presence of Wanda's people at a distance. Mia had remembered none of this and being around a Soul had often sent her into a fit. And yet now as her memories of her former self slowly reemerged, a very unlikely friendship had grown between Mia and Red Leaves Caught in the Wind. This relationship strangely gave Wanda hope for both peoples' future.

"Might I help?" queried Wanda as she fully took in the mess upon Red Leaves' head.

"I can fix it, Sister Wanda," insisted Mia as she produced a large pair of scissors and eyed the incomplete braid. The other girl gulped.

A little surge of contentment went through Wanda at Mia's use of 'Sister.' She called all the Humans here her brothers or sisters. Perhaps it was some part of her mental makeup to think of her people as one large extended family. Just like a Soul would. It made Wanda feel quite happy that Mia now considered her part of said family.

"I'm sure you can," broached Wanda. "But would you mind if I tried?"

Mia shrugged noncommittally but did drop the scissors. Red Leaves let out a relieved sigh. Taking a seat on the bed, she coaxed the other girl back and began to undue some of Mia's work.

"Thank you, Wanderer," said Red Leaves as Wanda worked. To Mia, she said, "I don't think your calling is for hairstyling, Mia"

"I did mean to mess it up," replied Mia a little reproachfully. She was quite for a while and then murmured. "My mother used to do my hair when I was little. I remember that."
Wanda stopped brushing and turned to Mia. The girl's dark eyes were distant and sad. "I'm sorry," said Wanda. Trying to cheer her up she offered, "I can do you hair next if you want."

Running her hand through her short hair, Mia again shrugged. "Not much you can do with it."

"You could let your hair grow out," said Red Leaves. She smiled reassuringly at Mia. "Then we can have matching hairdos."

"Hmm, maybe" considered Mia.

Going back to untangling Red Leaves' hair, Wanda worked away until a thought came to her. "Is this okay?" she asked Mia. "I know if you have too many of us near it causes problems."

"Oh, don't worry about that," said Mia dismissively about the strange itching sensation she felt when near a Soul. "I guess it doesn't bother me as much now that I understand what's happening. She paused for a moment. "Well, I mean, I don't exactly understand. Long Rivers says I have a prion protein imbalance in my dendrites." She paused again and added, "I think he made some of those words up."

Wanda smiled. She too had heard this information from the Healer and knew he was not creating new words. Neurons in Mia's brain had mutated. Dendrites of these altered cells, the tree-like structure of a neuron which allowed them to relay messages between each other, were now similar to the smallest structures of the silver threads on a Soul's body. Mia had a hybrid central nervous system, part Human, part Soul.

"No," replied Wanda gently. "Healer Long Rivers isn't making anything up. You're just different, and we're still learning how everything works."

Mia hugged her knees to her chest and let out a lamented sigh. "I wish I knew why they did this to me. What's the point? Why hurt so many people and me?"

"I don't know," said Wanda with a shake of her head.

Sensing her friend's melancholy, Red Leaves began to chat up Mia about her latest activities at school. Apparently she was going to be in a play. As the girls talked and Wanda worked, her mind shifted to Marc and Bright Moon. She knew by now both had joined the other Seekers in the vast woodlands of northern Michigan. A massive army of her people had gathered to hunt down the Facility. If this army were able to capture some of these people alive, maybe they would learn the reason behind the girl's transformation. Wanda was sure what had been done to Mia was not some random cruelty. There was a cold, calculating design to the Facility's actions. With a little shudder, she considered perhaps it would be better to not know.

"There," said Wanda at last as she finished Red Leaves' hair. She had returned the girl's long red hair to a simple knot braid. Standing back up, the young Soul studied her hair. She nodded appreciatively to Wanda.

"It's okay, Mia," said Red Leaves. "I know you didn't mean to make a mess of my hair." She twisted the end of the braid back and forth. "Maybe I will get it shortened. It will make taking care of my hair easier."

Then looking out the window, she saw the sun was beginning to set and let out a groan. "I'm going to have to get going," she said with an unhappy frown.

"Aww, can't you stay for dinner?" pleaded Mia.
Red Leaves' frown deepened. "Dawn Runner doesn't like me coming here. She and Summer Sky insisted I be home before dark."

"I could speak to them if you'd like," offered Wanda. "I should be able to ease any of their fears. You are perfectly safe here."

Coming right at the end of Wanda's assurances was the contradiction of angry shouts from outside Mia's room. Red Leaves jerked in alarm, still not used to being around Humans who often were capable of considerably more anger than Souls. Wanda and Mia traded concerned looks when further yelling was heard.

"Stay here," instructed Wanda to the two girls as she jumped off the bed. She was out to the hallway before either one had a chance to reply. Wanda did not have to go far down before she saw the source of the commotion. A Seeker in a neatly pressed black dress uniform stood in the hallway, survey one of the empty hotel rooms.

Tension rose in Wanda, a twisting of fear and a little bit of anger. The Seekers were meant to stay off this floor and give the Humans some amount of autonomy. They were only to enter if they detected a problem. Stopping in front of the Seeker, she said tersely, "What is going on here?"

He eyed her warily. Wanda had found most Seekers Wanda in Chicago regarded her as something between a curiosity and a semi-deranged individual. This Seeker seemed to fall somewhere in between. With his expression remaining neutral he replied, "We are conduction an inspection."

Wanda's forehead wrinkled in concerned confusion. "Inspection? What are you looking for?"

"Anything that might be considered dangerous," said a new voice from behind the man. The Seeker nodded in silent agreement and moved to the side to reveal the diminutive form of Seeker Jade in the Hollows and several other black uniformed Souls. Unlike the other Seekers, she was wearing a pale peach blouse and matching dress. Wanda had rarely seen her dress like a regular Seeker. Even as she was utterly committed to her calling, it appeared she did not like to dress in a uniform. She stood with her hands on her small hips, her expression quizzical as she looked back at Wanda.

"Dangerous?" asked Wanda.

"Dangerous?" mirrored the voice of Scott Alderman. "What the hell does that mean?" Wanda shifted her gaze from the Seekers to see the human striding down the hallway. Behind him were more of his people, all of them looking quite upset.

Jade turned to face the Humans and then shifted back to Wanda. Answering both sides with a syrupy-sweet smile, she said, "We are certainly within in our rights to inspect this holding site for any activity or material that might cause harm to the general populace."

Scott was incensed. "What!?" he exclaimed. "Do you think we're building weapons!?"

"Well..." considered Jade with a finger to her lips. "I doubt it...but one can never be too careful."

"This is total crap," snapped Jason from further down the hallway. "Marc's gone for less than a day, and you're pulling this raid."

"I agree," noded Wanda. "It seems you timed this 'Inspection' to happen exactly the day Marc and Sage of Tides left." She found her words came out far more harshly than they would normally. She and Jade had a number of on-going debates which were increasingly feeling like outright arguments. This latest confrontation was shaping up to only add to their dispute.
"Believe what you wish," sniffed Jade dismissively. She looked about, seeing the number of unhappy Humans piling up in the corridor. Shaking her head she tried again with a cloying smile. "Really," she said sweetly, "If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to worry about."

Scott rolled his eyes contemptuously. "Oh, really? Well then, can I come inspect your home? Never can be too sure, you might be planning something."

"I believe the general populace is not concerned about the contents of my home," replied Jade dryly. She then turned and walked away, cutting off any further questions.

Scott and other humans fumed, but were there was little they could do. Over the course of the next fifteen minutes, the Seekers went from room to room. They looked through dressers and drawers. Under beds and inside closets. Their presence greatly upset Sarah's and Mike's children, both who started crying loudly when the Seekers searched their room. Then Eric was incensed when the Seekers went through his collection of DVDs. He bitterly complained they had no right to judge their content 'violent.' Mia and Red Leaves joined Wanda as Mia's room was inspected. The young Soul watched the events unfold with distressed dismay.

Ian had managed to maneuver his way over to join Wanda's little group. As the minutes ticketed by she could see his growing agitation over Jade and the Seekers intrusion. She whispered to him, "I will talk with others, let them know what Jade is doing."

With the sound of little Tim crying in the background, Ian did not seem to hear her. Muttering under his breathing, "This is the way its always going to be. We will always be treated like second class citizens."

Wanda let out an exhausted sigh. Pained by both the Seekers actions and Ian's angry allegation that Humans would never be treated fairly by the Souls. Reaching out, she took his hand in hers. She gave it a gentle squeeze. After a moment, Ian returned the caress. "It will get better," she said, "I promise."

Jade returned and Wanda was surprised by what the little Seeker carried in her arms. Her book bag, which contained all Wanda's notes and books from her various forms of research. It had swelled to a considerable size and it caused Jade some difficulty in holding it.

"I see you've decided to search my property as well," said Wanda icily. She found the intrusion into her property quite irritating. Suspicion among Souls was such a rare thing and to go through another's items without asking was unheard of.

Her earlier sweet smile was gone. The search for 'dangerous' material in the Human's home was obviously grating on Jade as well. Too many angry humans. Too many sobs of upset children. After sitting the book bag down, Jade straighten back and let out an irritable sigh. "I am not enjoying this. I don't want to be searching this run down old hotel."

"Then why are you doing it!" growled Ian.

"Because," snapped Jade, uncharacteristically angry, "I am constantly under barrage by the city's inhabitants worried about having a group of Humans living among them. Concerned you may be 'up to something.'" Her eyes focused on Red Leaves, and Jade pointed. "Like her mother," she added with another tired sigh.

Red Leaves shrank back, looking mortified. "Dawn Runner did that? But why?"

"She worries about you coming here. Associating with these...people." chided Jade to Red Leaves.
Turning about, Jade looked over the hotel rooms and its unhappy inhabitants. "This is just my attempt to alleviate everyone's concerns."

Ian shook his head with an angry scowl and stomped away. Wanda sadly watched him go. "You could have handled this better," she told Jade.

Jade watch her silently for a moment and then answered. "Wanderer, you only meet with those of us happy over this 'coexistence' you are proposing. You don't see the disruption you are causing. Trust me, there are many more of us who very troubled. I had to do something." She rolled her slim shoulders, attempting to shrug away the current unpleasantness. With her foot, Jade pointed to Wanda's satchel. "I didn't know it was yours till I opened it," she admitted. A little hesitantly she added, "What is it?"

"It is..." began Wanda but trailed quickly off. Between her readings on the Humans' ancient civilizations and talks with Eric, she had begun to see the possibility that Humans had indeed been visited by aliens in the distant past. Perhaps even multiple races. It was entirely possible, the universe was vast, and the Souls by no means knew everyone out in the cosmos. But the Vultures? Visiting Earth in the past? It might not be impossible, but certainly very unlikely.

"It's just something I've been studying," answered Wanda finally. She was not sure she really wanted to share this with Jade. "Learning about humanity's history."

Frowning, Jade bent down and retrieved one of her notebooks. She flipped it open to a drawing. Wanda had made it for Eric and Ian. They had been curious to know what an actual Vulture looked like. So Wanda had done her best to sketch from old memories what the alien would look like. Remembering from handed down memories of the tall, thin creatures. It was not the most pleasant of tasks.

With her frown deepening, Jade ran a finger along the image. "Is this what I think it is?"

Wanda was about to explain why she had drawn a Vulture when a trembling voice came from behind her, "Monster..."

Both Jade and Wanda blinked in surprise and turned to see Mia. The girl's eyes were wide as possible.

Alarmed at Mia's inexplicable fear, Wanda asked, "Mia, what's wrong?"

Mia pointed with a shaking hand at Wanda's drawing. "It's the monster with the yellow-red eyes..."

"You should have told me about them sooner," said Smith as they passed down the main entrance of the San Gorgonio Memorial Hospital. His voice was not angry, he just looked tired and resigned. After they put Melanie in lock down, Smith had said little to him.

Things had not worked out exactly as he planned. Craig had hoped to have more time with Jared and Kyle. He still saw potential with those two. But Melanie and her denouncement of events in Chicago could well of damaged Madison's and Joe's trust in him. And truth be told, he need them a lot more than he needed Melanie. He had tried to play too many plots at once. Well, lesson learned.

As they walked through the lobby people around them were backing up needed equipment. Getting ready to move out. Things were moving fast now and but there was still time for Craig to act.
"I know," began Craig contritely. "But you've been busy. And I was thinking we needed to keep them isolated, less they interfere with our people." Although it was a bold face lie, he added, "I only just found out about Melanie's resistance."

Smith said nothing, his dark eyes distant. They continued to walk in an unpleasant silence. A steady unease building in Craig's body. He was about to try again to salvage his screw up with Smith when the man turned abruptly and made for the door to the stairway to the second floor.

Pushing open the door, Smith looked back at Craig. He said nothing, but his expression made it very clear he wanted him to follow. Craig made a little show of a nonchalant shrug, letting Smith know he was still in command.

The stairwell was plain and unadorned. A wide set of cement stairs sloped upward until they reached a narrow landing. With the hospital being on the small side and few needing access to the second floor, the flight of steps was deserted. At the landing, midway point in the climb to the second floor, Smith chose to vent his pent up anger.

Spinning around fast enough to catch even Craig off guard, the Facility Director laid into him. "I don't give a goddamn what you think! You are here to follow my orders! I don't need you running around second guessing me!"

Pressing a finger into Craig's chest, Smith continued to rant. "We have a plan in place and everything...and I mean everything is riding on our success."

He turned away and took a few steps up the next flight of stairs. Stopping on the third level, Smith swung back around to face him. Crossing his arms, Smith towered over him. Craig stood absolutely still.

"You don't think I don't know about your little 'chats' you have with your groupies?" questioned Smith. "Filling their heads about how they're going to be the ones in charge when the dust settles. Telling them about the better world you're going to make." He again jabbed his finger at Craig, chiding him like a child. "You aren't the one to make those changes. You just follow orders."

Smith let out a very pent up sigh. "We are close Craig," he said in a softer tone. "We're on the cusp of fundamentally changing Humanity. What came before will be meaningless. After all Paz and the others have done for us, we can't turn away from that now." His diatribe done, Smith remained standing. Looking down upon Craig with a waiting expectant expression.

Slowly, very slowly, Craig felt his head nod. Let his shoulders sag a bit. Looking browbeaten he responded in a subdued voice. "You're right Director Smith. I'm...sorry."

Making no response if he believed Craig's contrite apology or not, Smith turned and began climbing the remaining stairs. After a moment of hesitation, Craig followed after him.

As Smith reached the second to the last step, Craig softly spoke up. "Just one thing, Smith..."

"What?" came the man's one word reply. He turned his head, expecting to see Craig still cowed and trailing after him.

"What?" came the man's one word reply. He turned his head, expecting to see Craig still cowed and trailing after him.

It was the hit he never saw coming.

Craig jumped the last two steps, putting himself on the top step. He spun expertly and swung out his arms. Shoving the other man with a well placed blow. Smith's legs went from under him and his arms pinwheeled. He desperately tried to grab hold of the railing. But his hands skittered past the banister, clawing at empty air. There was nothing to break his fall but the hard cement steps.
Three successive bangs echoed in the stairwell as Smith tumbled down the stairs. With a sickening thud, he came to a rest at the landing below. It was certainly loud enough to draw attention. Craig would have to move quickly.

Running down the stairs, Craig made a quick estimation of the man's injuries. Smith had landed on his back, with his legs crumpled underneath him and his arms splayed out in two different directions. The always present black tablet had come to rest on his outstretched hand. Smith's head lulled awkwardly to the side. He looked like a marionette who had its strings cut.

His eyes were open. As Craig bent down over Smith, they focused on him. Glaring hatefully, a faint whistling breath came from his throat. But nothing else happened. Smith's glare was replaced with confusion.

"Your neck's broken," Craig informed him.

Kneeling down Craig placed one hand on Smith's mouth. Taking his other hand, he pinched Smith's nose close. The faintest of whines came from the broken man. Craig tightened his grip.

"Did you really think everyone was going to get on board with Alex's little crusade? That everyone would just line up for your brave new world?" he asked softly. He shook his head sadly. "All of you would simply trade one group of puppet masters for another."

Now Smith's eyes held nothing but stark terror. As much as he loathed him, Craig did feel a swell of pity. He found even as he suffocated Smith, he wanted to comfort the man in his last moments.

"I'm going to free us," he explained. "Don't worry," he added patiently, "I'll bring the fire as ordered. But after that I'll be handling things my way."

Smith's eyes were still open, but they were empty and unseeing. Craig started to rise but noticed Smith's tablet computer. The screen had a crack running up one side but otherwise looked functional. He picked it up and switched it on.

The video's color was distorted and washed out, but it was readable. A myriad of windows with layers of information spread out on the screen. Craig searched for the one he needed. He scrolled about for a moment and then found it. Dropping the tablet he heard a sound coming from the first floor stairway door. He had to hurry.

He only needed one more thing. The key card to Asag's chamber. Padding down Smith's body, he found the card in the man's front pocket.

The stairwell door below opened and voices echoed upward. It was time to move. Quick and silent, Craig dashed back up the stairs. Everyone's attention would be on Smith's body and he could make his escape. While it might not hold up to scrutiny, for now, Smith's fall would be seen as a tragic accident.

Excited shouts for a doctor reached Craig's ears as he slipped soundlessly through the upstairs door. The second-floor hallway was deserted. He let out one long breath, steadying himself. There was still much to do. But first things first, he needed to see Melanie Stryder.
Threshold

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jodi? Jodi...please wake up,' called Sunny into the dark recesses of the mind she shared with the Human.

No response came. Sunny was aware but could not move, not even to open their body's eyelids to see what was happening. But she could still feel sensations from the body she shared with Jodi. Cold and the pain. Those two horrid feelings were continually present.

'Jodi,' whimpered Sunny into the black pit of unconsciousness, 'Please don't leave me alone...please.'

Nothing.

Panic began to soar in the little Soul. Sunny had no idea how long it been since they had been brought before the Vulture. His translated words promising them they would be safe and unharmed. Yet what had followed was nothing but torment and terror. Jodi had been hauled up, kicking and screaming, onto one of the metal autopsy tables and strapped down. Needles stuck into her arms and a terrible biting icy cold had filled their veins.

'JODI! WAKE UP!' cried Sunny as loudly as she could manage.

A faint moan. It seemed very far away. 'Uhhh...'

'Jodi! Come back! I don't want to lose you...'

Awareness began forming and Sunny could feel Jodi trying to latch on to consciousness. The Soul started to pull the human's mind back. Such a strange thing for one of her kind to do, to try to return a host's mind to its body. But Sunny refused to let go and second by second the Human's thoughts resurfaced.

'Ohhh...my head,' feebly moaned Jodi.

Encouraged, Sunny again mentally shouted, 'Jodi, you can hear me!'

She felt Jodi push on her in a wave of groggy irritation. 'Stop yelling!' Fumed the Human. Relief flooded through Sunny.

Blurry washed out light filtered in as Jodi opened her eyes. Looking up, she saw a metal arm arched overhead. A single light affixed at the end of the arm. It glowed with a dull yellow light. Turning her head took an enormous effort and all she saw outside the narrow cone of light was darkness.

'Jodi, we have to get out of here,' said Sunny.

'Damn straight we do,' thought back Jodi to the Soul. Half-formed memories rose up in Jodi's mind. That creature...the Vulture standing over her. Those wicked red-yellow eyes steadily gazing down at her. 'Where is he?'

'I don't know,' quivered Sunny. 'I just came to a little while ago. But I couldn't move. I couldn't do
anything.'

'I think I can,' replied Jodi. Experimentally she tried to move her left arm. It rose slowly and sluggish but then stopped. Her wrist was held fast by a thick Velcro strap. Working her right arm, Jodi found it strapped down as well. After another lethargic pull on the belt, Jodi found it to be much looser than the left side. It was still strong enough to tie her down.

'Everything feels like I've got lead weights attached,' complained Jodi. 'I can move, but it's hard.'

Jodi felt Sunny try to move her body. Her first instinct was to fight the Soul for control, but Jodi clamped down on the urge and let Sunny make an attempt. A little twitch went through her limb and Sunny managed to flop her arm over.

'That doesn't help much,' observed Jodi.

Sunny considered and Jodi pondered. Both minds attempting to form a plan to escape this nightmare. Their thoughts running together.

'Together,' said Sunny in sudden realization. 'Yes,' Jodi agreed at once. Their twin consciousness seizing on the idea at the same time.

As one, they moved their right arm. A mutual effort of will and control. Twisting and tugging until the limb pulled free of the strap. Now freed, they coordinated their effort to work on the other restraint.

'How long do you think we've been here?' thought Jodi to Sunny as they worked

'I don't know...days maybe?' Returned the reply from the Soul. Memories, ancient memories, welled up in her. Images of Vultures, groups of them encircling some type of fire pit, played through Sunny's mind. Fear and revulsion from the Soul quickly followed.

'Don't get distracted,' warned Jodi as she saw the memories. Sunny's emotions were quick to weigh her down and there was no telling how much time they had before being noticed.

'How can a Vulture be here? On Earth? It's not possible,' wavered Sunny.

Their combined control was slipping, but Jodi was starting to feel stronger. Whatever drug or medication had kept her under was now apparently wearing off. She took up the slack as Sunny efforts weakened.

'Let's worry about how tall and scary got here later,' instructed Jodi.

The left strap now lay unfastened and Jodi began to pull herself up. She felt incredibly weak. Her body barely had any strength and everything ached horribly. The effort nearly exhausted her, but she finally managed to sit upright. Looking about, she saw she was on one of the metal autopsy tables. Examining her body, Jodi found at regular intervals along her arms red marks where the needles had slid into her skin. Fighting down a sudden wave of nausea, she peered into the darkness.

'I don't see the Vulture,' whispered Sunny.

Jodi concentrated on what little she did remember of the disturbing alien. Her time in this darkened morgue she could remember had been one continuous blurry nightmare. The Vulture moving slowly around her while she was strapped to this table. Odd clicks and hums coming from the creature as he worked. Once or twice she recalled him talking to her through the overhead speaker.
He called himself 'Asag.' It seemed to Jodi the alien considered his name important and she should be impressed to have met him.

She most certainly was not.

'Maybe he's sleeping or something,' hoped Jodi.

Turning her head gradually about, she searched for the door. But she only managed to turn half way before an unseen resistance tugged at her. Something was holding fast to the right side of her head. Reaching up with her hand she came into contact with a narrow cylinder. Hands shaking, she traced the tube down until it went right into the side of her skull.

"Oh God!" she cried out as hands unsteadily traced where it attached to her head.

Her fingers touched something like a plastic tab. It was firmly affixed the base of the tube and to the side of her head. She was trembling so badly so almost did not feel the click as it released.

Tightening her grip on the cylinder, Jodi pulled. It came away slowly, something was preventing her from wrenching it away. She managed to tug it far enough out that she could see what it was from the corner of her eye. It was a plastic syringe and at its tip was a long, thin needle.

Even as Jodi had managed to pull the syringe a few inches out, the needle was long enough to still be embedded in her. Roiling nausea simmered inside her. It took all Jodi's will power to keep her wobbly limbs operating to pull the hypodermic needle free.

In a quivering hand, Jodi examined the horrific device that had been attached to her head. The needle was sufficiently long to go deep into her brain. The sheer horror of what had happened was overwhelming. Abruptly she lost the battle with her unsettled stomach when she vomited out a sickly yellow fluid. Again and again, she retched, her whole body convulsing on the icy cold metal bed.

Tears flowed and Jodi made no attempt to stop them. She did not have the strength. 'This is bad...so very bad...'

Sunny sobbed along with her, 'I know...There's no hope...'

The Soul's defeated lament stirred something in Jodi. An ember of defiance. She reached deep within herself. 'I am not dying like this. Not here...not now...'

Closing her eyes, Jodi fought down the worst of her nausea. The air was still cold, but the metallic smell, which had been present since she was brought here, had diminished. A deep breath in and a deep breath out. Letting the worst of the shakes rattling her body pass. Inspired by Jodi, Sunny also began to get her fears under control. Minutes passed, just how many they were uncertain, but slowly the hollow sick feeling began to retreat. A soft warble came from nearby. Her eyes flickered open, blinking in the dull glow of the overhead light. Taking a few more steadying breaths, she pushed herself up to a sitting position on the cold metal table. Then Jodi turned towards the sound.

He was there. Standing just outside the illumination encircling the slab where she lay. Her jailer. Her tormentor. The alien monster, the Vulture named Asag. He stood absolutely still, his dark gray skin blending seamlessly into the shadows of the room. Only his large multicolored eyes reflecting the nearby light made him stand out. A startled shriek worked it way out of Jodi's parched throat. Instinctively she scooted away from the monstrosity.

"Jooooliiii," hooted Asag.
"Get away from me!" screamed Jodi.

He warbled again, "Laaay dooown." There was a pause and then more eerie noises came from his lip-less mouth. Unintelligible words. He slouched towards her.

'Got to run...' whimpered Sunny as the Vulture moved into the light.

Sunny might want to flee, but Jodi was beginning to feel the slow burn of a building fury. The long hypodermic needle was clutched in her hands. As one of Asag's lengthy arms stretched near, she stabbed out with the sharp end of the syringe. The pointed tip jabbed into the alien's wrinkled and almost scale-like skin. While the needle was not the most effective weapon and Jodi barely had any strength, the Vulture quickly yanked his arm back.

"Disssobbieddiant," he hissed at her.

Jodi realized Asag was speaking her language without the aid of a translating device. He had called her 'Disobedient.' A feral grin grew on her face. "I sure am!" she snapped back at the creature. She squeezed the hypodermic tight in her hand and held it up to the alien. She tried very hard to not let her hand tremble. "Come near me again and I'll jab this in one of your big, old, ugly eyes."

Asag bobbed his head back and forth. An odd movement from Jodi's perspective, as his head and neck swiveled as one. He shuffled slowly backward, deeper into the dark. In the act of retreating a little shiver went through the tall creature and something dark rustled in the shadows. Jodi saw wings extending from the alien's back, black and leathery.

Jodi was struck by an awareness that had little to do with one of Sunny's old memories of the aliens. In the dim darkness of the morgue, Asag stood with his wings spread wide. She quivered on the metal table, genuinely terror-struck by what she saw.

'Not a Vulture,' shuddered Jodi, 'He's a demon...'

But Asag's terrifying pose only lasted for a few disturbing seconds. As the Vulture arched his arms out towards Jodi, he was suddenly struck by intense wrenching coughs. His whole body spasming from loud wheezing barks coming from his thin mouth.

"Uhhhhrrrnnn, Uhhhhrrrrnnn," gasped Asag as his wings drooped and his body hunched forward in apparent pain.

At seeing her alien captor crippled, Jodi did not hesitate at the presented opportunity. Pivoting her body with her arms, she pushed herself off the stainless steel table. But her legs did not have the strength to hold her up, and they folded underneath her body like wet cardboard.

"Ow, dammit..." she cursed as pain rattled through her weakened body when she hit the floor.

Nearby the Asag was clutching his sides, his long bony arms wrapped tightly around his midsection. Wheezing sounds continued to burble from the Vulture's strange mouth. In the dim light it was hard to be certain, but to Jodi his skin colored had paled. Now it was more of a chalky gray color.

"Heeelp meee..." rasped Asag.

If it were not for her nausea, pain, and complete exhaustion, Jodi would have laughed out loud at his plea. She would much rather run the wretched creature over with truck then give any type of aid. Not that she was in a position to do much. Instead, she started to half-crawl, half-drag herself with her weak limbs, hopefully in the direction of the exit. But Sunny, ever present, whispered out...
from the back of her mind. 'Maybe we should help...'

'You can't be this stupid,' shot back Jodi. Reaching out, she grasped a metal table leg and pulled herself deeper into the dim darkness. Even this small effort left her arms trembling with fatigue. Mentally she pressed on with Sunny. 'After everything he's done to us, you want to help him? ' She could feel Sunny's fear and wariness of the Vulture but at the same time the little Soul could not stand to see anyone suffer. Even someone who had terrorized them for days.

'I know, Jodi...I can't blame you for hating the Vulture. I don't like what he did any more than you. But hate isn't something my kind does...At least not very well. And I'm scared of the Vulture too...But if there is something we could do and don't, aren't we just being cruel?' Sunny paused, her part of their shared mind racing through ideas. 'We're not strong enough to get out of here on our own. We don't even know where the exit is located. Maybe we can get the way out if we help Asag.'

Jodi could only shake her head in exasperated irritation. 'How the hell has your kind ever accomplished a damn thing? You have the survival instincts of a marshmallow...'

But before Sunny could make a reply, an audible snap echoed throughout the room. Without warning, all the lights came on. Jodi winced at the sudden increase illumination. Blinking rapidly she tried to get her eyes used to the new level of light. Unsteadily she rose to her knees and looked about. On the nearby tables Jodi saw an elaborate setup of machines and devices she could not begin to comprehend. With another twist of unease in her stomach she noticed more black body bags on the far side of the room, each one apparently occupied with a corpse. The fluorescence lights had transformed the dark and creepy morgue into brightly lit but still very frightening room. And at the center of this twisted mad scientist laboratory lay the Vulture Asag. He was on his side, one of his large wings lay partially unfurled behind him. The thin body of the Vulture slowly shuddering as he struggled to breathe. His strange eyes closed.

'Someone turned the lights on,' it had to be Smith or one of his lackeys reasoned Jodi. 'They've must have the Vulture monitored or something...they know if he needs help...'

'I don't think we can run, Jodi...we need to hide...'

Sunny's reply came just as Jodi finally managed to spot the door to the outside. By whatever little luck she had, she had been crawling in the right direction. But that luck apparently had run dry, because she could hear a voice on the other side of the door. She was not going to let Smith, or anyone else put her back on one these damn tables. Sunny was right, they needed to hide.

As the door opened, Jodi went flat on her stomach. The rows of tables would provide some amount of cover. But it would not take long for someone to spot her. A quick glance at the nearest table to her from her vantage point showed it to have an open lower shelf. It was filled with various jugs and bottle of an assortment of chemicals. There was just enough space beneath it for someone of Jodi's size to fit.

It would not be the best of hiding spots, but with no other choices, Jodi inched her way underneath. Space was tight, she would not be able to raise her head more than a few inches without hitting the shelf's bottom. All she could see now was the cold tiled floor and the legs of the nearby tables.

Footsteps echoed through the room. They were slow, tentative. As if the person or persons was unfamiliar with this place. Uncertain what they would find. But it would be impossible to not notice the Vulture. The alien was far too large and utterly too strange to miss.

"I wanted you to see him," said a man's voice. It was low and even, but it did not belong to Director
"I wanted you to understand what's been going on," continued the unknown man. There was a pause and his voice went up in volume. "Not so tough are you when I shut off your air. You just lay there, gasping for your last breath."

There was a muffled response, but Jodi was certain it did not come from Asag. The voice belonged to a woman, but it was somehow stifled or restricted. Jodi could not make out what was being said.

"You know what he is," replied the unseen man. "You've got the memories from when you were a host. You know what the Souls call this thing." A long moment passed while Jodi strained to hear the response, but she heard nothing.

"Now look at him as a human. It is no coincidence. See the wings, see his scaly skin, and tell me what you see!"

The man's voice was recognizable. Jodi had heard it before. Where? There was a bit of drawl to his words. A southern accent. She racked her mind. It was before all Sunny had woken up. She had been with Jeremy...The man with the fake silver eyes...What was his name?

There were sounds of someone moving about. One of the tables groaned in protest as it was shoved out the way. Where they looking for her, Jodi wondered? They did not seem especially interested in helping Asag. In fact, the man Jeremy had introduced her to, claimed he had tampered with the Vulture's air supply. Till now Jodi had assumed Smith and the others were in league with the alien. But it was possible not everyone was on board with such an alliance.

"What?" snapped the southern accented man. His name was right at the tip of Jodi's tongue.

"How?" came the woman's voice. This time, she was louder and unrestricted. "How can a Vulture be here? Where did it come from?"

Jodi did not recognize her voice, but Sunny did. Astonishment jolted through the Soul. 'That's Melanie!' She felt Sunny try to move her body, rising in excitement. But Jodi held fast. She was not going to reveal herself until she understood what was going on.

"Don't you get it?!" growled the man. "They're the truth behind our legends of devils and demons. They've been here all along! When we were building the pyramids, they were here! Waiting in the shadows, planning and preparing us."

"W-What do you m-mean?" asked Melanie, her voice was shaking with fear.

"Did you really think your ability to continue on after Wanda was put in your head had something to do with your can-do spirit? That humanity's 'resistance' to the Souls was just a happy accident? We were made that way."

A silence then hung heavy in the air and Jodi felt her mind racing. A thousand questions bubbled on top a thousand more. Everything that had happened to her since she had woken up had been some sort of lie or manipulation. Was this the truth or was it more lies? She had been too trusting with Smith and she had wound up in this nightmarish room. Whom could she trust? Was this man with Melanie a friend or foe? Was what he was saying true?

From Sunny's memories, Jodi knew the Souls had never encountered a race who's minds endured after insertion. But Humans had been different, at least some of them had resisted the Souls' control. Like Melanie, her mind had continued on even after she had become a host. The Souls had theories, but the truth was they did not complete understand why it happened. Jodi, herself, had
never been resistant to Sunny. She had been completely gone until Sunny was exposed to CURE. Was Melanie somehow different? For that matter why was Melanie here? Sunny knew her, but Jodi did not. Was she truly a friend?

'She is!' insisted Sunny. 'Melanie was always kind to me. And she's practically a sister to Wanderer."

'Maybe,' considered Jodi. 'But there is so much we don't understand right now. We need to be very careful...'

The mystery man was talking again. His voice tight with barely controlled anger. "You've screwed up enough things tonight, Melanie. I still need you, but you'll keep your mouth shut and do exactly as I say or I will have Jared and Kyle put down like rabid dogs."

At hearing Kyle's name and the threat to his life, both Jodi and Sunny let out a startled gasp. The noise would have been certainly audible to the other two in the room if it had not been for Melanie's angry outburst coming at the same time.

"You bastard..."

She was cut off by the sound of a vicious slap. A cry of pain followed.

"Armageddon is a com'in, girl! And you best be on my side when it gets here!"

The noise of someone being pulled roughly along reached Jodi's ears. They were retreating, at least the man was, it sounded like Melanie was fighting him. Risking a better look, Jodi pulled half way out of her hiding spot under the table to see what was happening.

A woman with dusky skin and dark hair was being led out of the room. Her hands were bound behind her back and a gag had been placed in her mouth. She bore a deep red mark on her cheek, evidently where the man had hit her. Her assailant was tall, well built, and now Jodi was sure he was the man she had met before. And with the sight of him, his name came back...Craig Williams.

At the door to the outside, Williams glanced about the room. Jodi pressed back against the floor, hoping he did not see her. He did not look for long and moments later she heard the door open and then close. Except for the soft electronic whirl of the medical equipment the morgue was as quiet as a tomb. Slowly Jodi pulled herself from under the table and let out a breath she did not know she was holding.

On unsteady legs, she stood up. A moment of dizziness followed but Jodi steadied herself by gripping the edge of one of the examination tables. Taking a few cautious steps, she found the unmoving body of Asag on the floor nearby. His creepy yellow-red eyes were open but the alien was clearly dead. The thin lip-less mouth hung open and dark purplish fluid trailed out. The bright lights the room had done nothing to diminish the Vulture's frightening appearance. Her mind was still buzzing over what she had overhead.

Sunny interrupted with an urgent whisper. 'Jodi, we have to help Melanie.'

Pulling herself away from the disturbing dead alien, Jodi nodded. 'I know...But I'm not sure what we can do. We can barely stand.'

Sunny's answer was quick in coming. 'That Human, the one with the eyes like my kind. He was threatening to kill Kyle.' Sunny's mental voice wavered with fear for Kyle's safety that mirrored Jodi's own. 'That means Kyle and Jared are captive somewhere around here. Maybe we can find them.'
"We can try,' agreed Jodi. 'But first things first, let's get the hell out of this morgue.'

"No way in hell!" snarled Scott.

Beside him, Dell rumbled like an angry thunderstorm. "It would only happen over my dead body."

Since Mia's surprising revelation of recognizing Wanda's drawing of a Vulture, there had been a nonstop argument between the Humans and the Seekers. The Humans, already angry over Jade's search of their home had defiantly stood their ground about turning Mia over to the Seekers. With tempers rising, violence seemed a certainty. Wanda had suggested a meeting between just the key players and let the other Humans cool down. Now Scott, Dell, Wanda, Mia, Healer Long Rivers, and Seeker Jade sat in an empty hotel room attempting to reach some type of compromise. It was not going well.

On the other side of the table, Jade smiled thinly at the two men. Speaking as if she was addressing young children, she replied, "As I've explained, while there is some risk, our Healers would take excellent care of Mia. The Soul inserted into Mia would be only temporary while they searched for her 'lost' memories."

Scott was already agitatedly tossing his head back and forth before Jade had even finished. He jutted a finger out towards Healer Long Rivers, who stood to one side of the room with a very perturbed expression on his face. "Long Rivers," said Scott, "thinks a Soul insertion into Mia is dangerous and isn't even sure it can work. You're putting Mia at risk for no reason at all!"

Jade glanced at the unhappy Healer and then back to Scott. She pressed a finger down on a nearby notebook. It was Wanda's, a collection of notes from both her research and meetings with other Souls. At the moment, it was open to a drawing of tall, thin being with large eyes and long knobby arms that ended in hands with four stubby digits.

"Mia says she has seen this before," said Jade as she indicated the drawing. "I would very much like to know where and when."

"She says she's seen this Vulture thing in her dreams. That hardly makes it worth risking her life," countered Scott.

"Her dreams could very well be her subconscious dealing with the trauma of her experiences with the Facility," said Jade.

Long Rivers spoke up, his voice pleading for calm. "I believe it's more likely Mia's mind is confused. Her...situation has fragmented her Human memories with infant Soul welded to her brain." He gestured to the others of his kind in the room before continuing. "We Souls can easily tell between memories passed down from our mothers from our own. Mia could lack this ability.

Jade shook her head. "You do not know this for certain, Healer." She looked to where Wanda stood next to Mia. Wanda did not look much like her serene self. Her whole body rigid with worried concern. Jade pointed ignored Wanda's disapproving stare. "Wanderer has told me of your Humans' 'Chariot of the Gods' theory." A condescending smile spread on her oval face. "I will admit, you humans have such entertaining ideas."

Dell folded his wide arms. "If you think it's a joke, why are you bothering?"
"Because maybe, just maybe, it's not. Mia may have actually seen a real, live Vulture. Perhaps when she was held captive." Jade's smile dropped and she turned serious. "And if there is even a possibility that a Vulture remains, we must investigate. We must have access to Mia's memories."

Scott guffawed, a bitter sound of resentment. "I don't really give a damn what you want. You don't touch Mia."

"Brother Scott..." began Mia but was quickly interrupted by Jade.

"Your agreement with us requires your complete assistance in helping us track down the Facility." Her patronizing smile came back. "Proving to us that your kind can be trusted to be...civilized. I would hate to see our little 'alliance' jeopardize."

A disgusted snort came from Scott. "You are a real piece of work, you miserable worm."

"Insults..." scorned Jade. "I can have a hundred or so Seekers here in less than ten minutes to force this issue." She made minor shrug of her shoulders, "I would rather you see the logic of a more harmonious solution."

"Please," said Wanda, distressed over the deepened anger between the Humans and the Seekers. The accord between the Chicago rebels and her people had always been fragile. It had only been under Sage of Tides a brokered peace between the Seekers and the handful of humans here. Without his presence, it was already beginning to crumble. "Jade," she continued to plead, "Try to see this from the Humans' point of view. You are asking them to potentially sacrifice one their own, a child no less, on meager evidence. Would we ask this of our own kind?"

"What Soul would not volunteer if asked to do something for the greater good?" replied Jade evenly. "Mia is, well, partly us. Stands to reason she should be willing to help."

Mia started to speak up again when Scott cut her off. "Jade, what Mia is or isn't is none of your business. You Souls have taken enough from us."

Jade had just opened her mouth to respond when Mia loudly broke in. "Why does no one let me talk!? This is about me!" She threw her hand out, indicating everyone present. "You all are the same. You want to make all the decisions yourselves!"

Pain shadowed Wanda's face. "Mia, we're just trying to protect..."

Not letting her finish, Mia stuck a finger in Wanda's face. "No, you're not. Wanda, you want things your way." She then pointed to Jade. "And you want things your way. You Souls are always doing what your kind wants without asking anyone else!"

Both Jade and Wanda flinched away under Mia's tirade. Dell gave the girl an amused smirk. "Got a point there."

"Not done," snapped Mia. "Humans just as bad. Facility people take me and who knows how many others to experiment on. Never asked me if I wanted to be a lab rat. And now Brother Scott decides what's best for Mia without actually asking Mia what she wants!"

After her rant, Mia's shoulders sagged from evident fatigue. She finally set her sights on Jade. The Seeker had been startled by the girl's outburst, but now leaned forward, her eyes expectant. "Very well," said Jade. "What do you want to do?"

"I tried to help. I tried to remember everything," stated Mia.
Jade gave a small nod of her head. "I believe you. I don't think you've held back anything you can recall."

Mia's gaze had focused on the floor, her eyes distant. "Can this work?" she asked quietly. "One of you get inside my head, help me remember?"

Nodding again, Jade said, "I believe it can."

"There is a risk, Mia," informed Long Rivers in a grave voice. "We cannot accurately predict how inserting another Soul into your body will affect you." He refocused on the Seeker. "I also see risk for the Soul who makes the attempt. Anyone connecting with Mia's brain would run the risk of becoming absorbed by her mind."

"My Healers disagree with your theory," said Jade. "Besides, the insertion would be temporary. Such a possibility of a host mind overwhelming one of us in a short time is unlikely."

"Would you do it?" asked Mia.

Startled, Jade spun back to Mia. "What?"

"Would you be the one to get in my head and help me remember. As you said, it would be for the greater good."

Jade faltered, "Well...I mean..."

"So you can't do it," declared Mia. "I wanna make sure whatever Soul jumps in, knows what they're doing."

Flushing, Jade had to take a moment to compose herself. "I did not say that," she replied flatly. "Only that I would need some time to make arrangements." Peering down at her small body, Jade elaborated, "I would have to make sure my current host was...preserved." This earned her disgusted looks from Scott and Dell.

"How long?" asked Mia.

Still a little flustered, Jade responded after a few moments of consideration. "Tomorrow morning."

Scott, who had listened to Mia and Jade speak with growing unease, spoke up now. "Mia are you sure? You don't need to do this for some idiotic ideal of the 'greater good.'"

Mia was adamant. "I want to know what was done to me and why." She let out a strained sigh. "And I don't know if seeing the Vulture was a memory or just a confused dream like Long Rivers said. But I want to know...I need to know."

Silence ruled after Mia had finished speaking. Eventually, Jade rose from her seat. Her smile was back, although a good deal less patronizing than before. "I am glad we've reached an accord. It seems you humans can be...reasonable." She glanced to Mia and added, "I will see you tomorrow. Mia, I will...be very careful with you."

A lopsided grin formed on the young girl's face. "I'll try to be careful with you as well, Seeker."

Everyone saw Jade pale just a shade whiter and the Seeker seemed to be keen to leave now that an agreement had been made. After Jade had left, Wanda came to Mia. Regret had replaced the Soul's worried appearance.
"I'm sorry Mia," said Wanda. "I didn't mean to suggest..."

Interrupting, Mia asked urgently. "Can you do it?"

Wanda blinked in surprise. It took her a few seconds to realize what Mia was asking. "What? You mean, have me inserted into you instead of Jade?"

"Yes," said Mia with a nod to the stunned face of everyone else in the room. "I don't trust Jade at all. I only said I wanted her to get her to leave." She shook her head and added, "She's scared."

Looking to Long Rivers, Wanda saw the Healer was already shaking his head. "I strongly do not recommend trying."

Wanda turned back to stare at Mia with open amazement. The idea a Human would willingly let themselves be inserted and with such potential danger. "You trust me?"

"I do," answered Mia.

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Even before he and Kyle had been brought before Williams, Jared had been planning their escape. After narrowly preventing Kyle from getting shot from Smith's orders Melanie had been taken away, evidently she was something special to the man. With growing dread in the pit of his stomach, Jared had pushed their escape plan forward. The plan was a relatively straightforward. They had managed to pry open their cell's door and planned to ambush the first one of these Facility people they could lay their hands on. But by the time they had managed to get out, they had found the garage they had been imprisoned in oddly quiet.

Kyle popped his head in from the outside hallway where he had been exploring. "This place is deserted."

"First they tried talking us into joining them, then they nearly shoot us, and now they just leave us?" asked a disbelieving Jared.

Kyle shrugged. "Melanie said these 'Facility' people were nuts. She really wasn't exaggerating." He glanced back and forth to the outer hallway and added, "We should go."

"We need to figure out what they've done with Mel," replied Jared. "We don't..."

"Yes, we do," interrupted Kyle. "San Gorgonio Memorial Hospital. We thought the Seekers were up to something and everything pointed back to that hospital. But it was the 'Facility' people the entire time. That's got to be their base of operation."

Jared paused in thought. Kyle was likely right. They would accomplish nothing staying here. Time to get moving. No one stopped them as they exited out of the building. It was closing in on midnight and the sky was clear and the moon full. The pale yellow orb of the moon cast a silvery glow to their surrounding. Many cars were parked by the station, but they were all empty. The gas station and garage were they had been held appeared to be on the outskirts of Banning.

Jared wonder aloud how the other Humans had managed to keep the Souls away. Kyle pointed to a sign near the road. It read - 'Closed for cleanup and repair. We'll reopen soon. Have a wonderful day.'
"That's all it takes to keep the Souls away?" asked Jared.

"No Soul would lie to another, so they stay away," said Kyle with an annoyed sigh. "I give these guys credit, they know how to play the buggers."

It did not take them long to find Jared's Jeep in the parking lot. They were soon back on the road, heading deeper into the city. There were few cars on the road. At this late hour, almost everyone was certainly sleeping. At least the Souls were. Jared had uncomfortable feeling the humans the Facility had freed were most certainly up to something and his Mel was caught in the middle of it.

As the destination came into view, Jared slowed his Jeep. The moon hung high in the sky and it provided a sharp contrast to the rising clouds of smoke coming from the hospital.

"Jesus," breathed Kyle as they both took in the flames licking up one side of the building.

The Jeep came to a full stop. Jared scanned back and forth, letting his eyes wander over everything. Looking for potential traps. The road to the hospital was clear, empty of any traffic. But the hospital's parking lot was crowded with yellow painted vehicles. Lines of orange and white barrels sectioned off a wide swath of the area around the hospital. None of the equipment was in use, but at their distance it was impossible to tell if anyone was waiting for them or not.

Kyle asked softly, "You think Melanie is still in there?"

Jared eyed the burning hospital. Smoke was billowing out of the second story windows. "Don't know for sure, but we got to check it out."

Kyle nodded firmly and Jared sent the Jeep forward. It did not take them long to see that a good deal of the areas around the hospital had closed off. Signs with polite messages apologizing for the mess and if anyone needed access to the hospital that they please use only the main entrance.

Driving forward, Jared considered how the hospital was just like the highway construction trap. The agents of the Facility had used the phony facade of repair work to hide. Controlling access in and out of the hospital. Did they only let those they needed get near the hospital? Banning was a relatively small city but still had to have a population numbering in the tens of thousands. And somehow the Facility had managed to build up a small army right under the noses of the Souls.

But now with the fire raging it was impossible to hide any longer. Already there was a small crowd of people by the front entrance as Jared pulled the Jeep to a stop. In the flickering firelight it made the silver in the eyes reflect. Jared eyed the gathered Souls warily. Their attention was completely focused on the burning building.

"Follow my lead," he told Kyle as he pushed open the door. "Don't get too jumpy around them."

"Honestly, I'm not sweating over the Souls," replied Kyle as he opened the passenger door. "Strange as it is, I'm much more worried about running into our own kind."

"You and me both," quietly grumbled Jared.

The crowd was made up of all ages, young and old. It was plainly evident some had braved going into the hospital, looking for anyone trapped. Others had already cleared space around the entrance, either to make space for those with injuries or for emergency vehicles to fight the spearing flames.

"I...I didn't see...anyone...inside," sputtered a middle-aged woman to the onlookers. Smudges of dirt and ash stained her clothes and hair.
"That was very brave of you, Leaves Forward," said a young man, really just a teenager. He patted the older woman's back as she coughed a few times. "But the firefighters will be here soon. They'll be better equipped to handle this disaster."

Others in the crowd saw Jared's and Kyle's approach. Nodding a bit wearily, another man with thinning straw-colored hair, spoke to them. "Thank you for stopping. We've contacted emergency services..."

"How long has the fire been burning?" interrupted Jared impatiently. Neither he nor Kyle had time for always polite Souls.

"Not long," replied the man with a frown. "But fire is spreading rapidly. I'm not sure..."

"They're covering their tracks," broke in Kyle. His eyes gazed over the entire hospital, his expression inscrutable.

"Yeah," agreed Jared. "Whatever they've been planning, its going down now."

"W-Who are you?" asked the thin-haired man. Several other Souls were also looking at them with curious gazes. Wondering about these two strange newcomers.

Through the glass door entrance Jared could see shadowy clouds of smoke and the lick of flame beginning to creep along the side of the walls. Making up his mind, Jared strode forward. Heading right for the entrance. Kyle was right behind him.

"Wait!" said several of the Souls as it became clear what they were doing. "It's dangerous. Please come back!"

Kyle stopped and took a giant step back towards the crowd. He leaned forward and with the ever brightening fires he made it very easy for all to see the lack of silver in his eyes. He bellowed out, "Run for your lives! The Humans are coming!"

All of the gathered Souls gaped at him in open horror. Spinning around Kyle ran to catch up with Jared. "I've always wanted to do that," he said with a grin.

At the entryway door Jared grunted, "That was stupid."

"Maybe," conceded Kyle. "But for all we know, this whole place is booby-trapped and going to exploded. Scaring them off could be saving their lives."

That idea had not occurred to Jared. The blaze was already spreading rapidly through the hospital. Very likely an accelerant had been used to speed the burning. If there was more of it stored in the building, this entire place could go up in a heartbeat. And Jared could not shake the feeling this fire was simply the prelude to something much bigger and deadlier.

No way around it. They would have to go in. Melanie might still be here or maybe there was a clue to where the Humans had gone. "Let's go and move as fast as we can," he said as he pushed the door open.

The moment Jared and Kyle stepped through into the burning hospital they were hit by a tremendous wave of heat. It staggered the two men. Flames curled along the walls and ceiling tiles. Thick, black smoke roiled about them. Stinging their eyes and choking their breath.

Kyle pulled up the neck of his shirt over his mouth and nose, giving himself a weak mask against the sooty air. Jared filed suit and they both took off down the burning hallway. A creak and then a
loud groan came from deeper in the interior of the hospital. Moments later a reverberated crash went through the entire building. The explosion sent another gust of scorching hot air down the passageway and a rush of fiery embers around the two men.

They had at most mere minutes to make their search. Jared yanked his makeshift mask down and yelled into the inferno. "MEL!"

"MELANIE!" echoed Kyle.

The hallway ended with an intersection splitting to the left and right. In front of them was once a nursing station. Now it was nothing but a churning bonfire. Burning plastic of computer and other medical equipment created an especial noxious smoke. Kyle coughed repeatedly as he tried to once again call out for their missing companion.

"We don't...have time to search both ways," wheezed Jared as swung his head back and forth. Trying to decide which branch they should take.

Focusing on one of the hospital's waiting rooms, Kyle saw movement in the corner of his eye. The door was open but dark and sooty clouds of ash largely obscured its interior. The fires had not reached it yet, it was mostly intact. "Thought I saw something move in there," he gasped out.

Jared turned, attempting to spot what Kyle had seen when the other man suddenly shot forward, racing towards the shadowy room. Giving chase, Jared was only a few paces behind Kyle when he heard him howl, "SUNNY!"

Kyle leaped into the room. At first, Jared thought the man was wildly jumping at shadows, there was nobody here. But then he did spot her. In the far corner she lay curled into a tight ball. Her arms wrapped around her face, attempting to shield herself from the poisonous air. It was her all too familiar long curly hair bunched around her head that gave her identity away.

She peaked out of from behind her curls and her eyes blinked back tears. "K-K-Kyle?" she sputtered in amazed wonder.

Scooping her up in his big arms, Kyle squeezed Sunny close. Protecting her from the smoke and encroaching flames with his entire body. Overjoyed, he gushed out, "Sunny...Baby...I thought I'd lost you..."

Cradled in Kyle's arms, Sunny gawked at her rescuer. Then she said something Jared had never heard the gentle Soul say before - "You asshole!"

She began to angrily thrash about. Managing to wiggle her hands free from Kyle's hold, Sunny pushed him away. Her struggling was weak and ineffectual, yet her actions so strange for a Soul that Kyle nearly dropped her. Utterly stunned, he managed to regain his grip while choking out a questioning, "Sunny?"

"You don't see me! You want her!?!" she sobbed as furious tears streamed down her cheeks. Still feebly hitting Kyle's chest she muttered bitterly, "You stupid worm...I hate you."

Kyle could only stare dumbfounded at the angry women. But Jared could see the truth. Every second the fire grew and even in this smoky room there was enough light for him to confirm the lack of reflecting silver in the small dark-haired woman. The Facility had no interest in keeping Souls around, they were in the business of bring back Humans. Craig Williams and his people had done what Doc and Wanda had failed to do, return Jodi's mind to her body.

"Kyle," Jared coughed out, "look at her eyes."
Blinking back the stinging smoke and perhaps some of his own tears, Kyle stared down into her dark eyes. His jaw worked soundlessly for several seconds and finally he managed to say one word. A single word filled with a complete spectrum of his emotions. Wonder, amazement, joy, guilt, and just a little bit of fear.

"Jodi."

"There you go hon," whispered Ian.

With infinite care, he slowly released the silver ribbon that was the real Wanda. She slid forward into the narrow incision Healer Long Rivers had made into Mia's neck. Her billowing tendrils carefully, almost languidly, stretched out and began to feel the inside of her temporary home. Undulating and twisting about, she moved deeper within the sleeping human.

"Wow," breathed Kate as she watched Wanda's thousand thin feathery attachments begin to weave to and fro. They moved together in coordinated ripple, the hundreds of tiny legs looking like a silver hair blown in a gentle breeze.

Scott and Jason were close by as well, but they seemed far more squeamish over the whole process. They watched warily as Ian stepped back and Long Rivers began to work on closing the narrow cut on Mia's neck.

"You sure you know how to take Wanda out without hurting Mia?" asked Scott, concern prevalent on his features. His eyes never left her unmoving form. Mia reclined on one of the Hotel Rose's beds. She slept deeply, induced by a dosage of the Healer's SLEEP medication. Arrayed on her forehead, temples, and sides of her neck were tiny black circles. Small sensors designed to monitor all aspects of a human host's health.

"I've done it before," answered Ian quietly. He too was watching Mia very carefully. His worries split between the girl and Wanda. He did not understand the complicated biology at play as Wanda attempted to join with and help recover Mia's lost memories. But he did see the risks to both Human and Soul.

"There," said Long Rivers after sealing the open wound. He straightened up and glanced to where Kate sat watching over the Healer's medical equipment. "Ms. Gonzales, how are their vitals?"

"Mia's blood pressure is good, her intracranial pressure is a little high...I think," replied Kate with a slight frown as she studied the monitor.

"That is to be expected," answered the Healer. He turned to the others and explained, "When we are first inserted the added mass causes an increase in pressure of the cerebrospinal fluid inside the skull. Taking control of body allows us to regulate the fluid and protect the host brain and ourselves." He paused as he looked over the instrument's readings. "If Wanderer is successful in bonding with Mia, the pressure will go down."

"How long?" asked Jason.

"A few minutes at most."

"Because," put in Scott as he finally turned his gaze away from Mia and focused on Ian and Long Rivers, "if this even looks like it's going sideways, you're pulling Wanda out right away."
"You will get no argument from me," said Long Rivers. The Healer's face grew tight with his own worries. "I am only doing this because Wanderer and Mia were so insistent."

Ian sighed as he looked back down at Mia's slowly rising chest and then over to where Wanda's host body lay unconscious. She looked like she was sleeping like Mia. But she would never wake up. An empty shell waiting for a controlling mind. If this went wrong...

Long Rivers saw Ian's troubled expression. Tentatively he put his hand on Ian's shoulder. An effort of giving some comfort. "You did very well with Wanderer's insertion. I had...doubts about letting you perform it, but I couldn't have done it better."

"Thanks," replied Ian with a weak smile.

"I know this is difficult for all of you," said Long Rivers to the other Humans in the room. "But if we are successful we can prevent Jade..."

"Yeah, we get it," snapped Scott. "Just because I'm agreeing to this doesn't mean I like this one bit."

Kate looked up from reading Mia's vitals. "I just wish Annie or Simon would have helped. I'm flying blind here."

"Can you blame them?" grumbled Jason. "Annie was almost hysterical when Wanda announced she would insert herself into Mia. She can't stand the idea of overseeing another Soul insertion."

Long Rivers had pulled back from both Scott's and Jason's angry outbursts. He could not alleviate the Humans' anger, but he could do his best to make sure this risky operation succeeded. Calming his nerves, he stepped forward to stand behind Kate. "You are doing well," he assured her.

"I think," began Kate and her eyes tracked over the readings. "Yeah," she continued, "The intracranial pressure is dropping." She ran a finger across the screen, underlining an erratically rising and falling moving mark. "What is this here?" she asked the Healer.

"It is roughly analogous to your EKG readings. A measurement of brain activity," explained Long Rivers.

"Is it supposed to be all over the place?" questioned Kate.

Long Rivers nodded gravely. "With Mia, it has always been irregular. I don't exactly know what is normal for her."

Ian was kneeling next to Mia, his eyes watching her small face expectantly. "I think she's starting to wake up."

Long Rivers spoke softly. "Wanderer, can you hear us?"

"Uhhhh," groaned Mia.

Placing Mia's small hand in his, Ian bent close and whispered into her ear. "Wanda, its Ian...are okay?"

Mia's eyelids flickered while her mouth moved and soft words came out. "Oh...this is..." Then she trailed off as her head lolled to one side and then back.

Watching Mia sluggishly toss and turn, Kate asked, "Should we use AWAKE or something?"
"No," answered Long Rivers. "I don't want to unduly excite them until we know if this will work or not."

Abruptly Mia's eyes shot open and she sat forward on the bed. "Oh...wow..."

Jumping her gaze between the monitoring equipment and the girl, Kate stuttered out, "Mia...Are you okay?"

Mia blinked slowly as she took in her surroundings. Her eyes lingered on the sleeping form of Wanda's previous host body. She nodded slowly and said, "We're okay, Kate."

Ian leaned in close. "Wanda, is that you?" Looking close at Mia's young face, he could just detect the faintest of glows coming from her dark eyes.

The corners of Mia's mouth turned up in a tiny smile. When she spoke her voice was soft and affectionate. "Hello, Ian."

Ian let out a shaky sigh. "Hon, are you sure you're alright?"

"And what about Mia?" added Scott.

"I'm fine," answered the Soul. "Mia is..." and she shook her head. "She's doing as well as can be expected."

"What does that mean?" questioned Jason.

Wanda in Mia's body shifted so she could better look at the Humans in the room. "It is as Mia said before. She was shattered into millions of pieces. Her conscious was broken into a many parts and then stitched back together. Her mind is unlike any other I've experienced."

"Does that mean she broken? Or her mind is gone!?" demanded Scott.

The tiny smile came back to Mia's face. "No more than she normally is." She straightened on the bed. "As I've said, we're both okay."

Long Rivers cleared his throat and said rather sternly, "I am the Healer here and I will be a judge of your health."


"Bossy I may be," rejoined Long Rivers as he began to examine Wanda's temporary new host body, "but you will sit still while I inspect your latest crazy scheme I've gotten mixed up in."

Wanda smiled again and this time it looked a bit like one of Mia's impish grins. But she did obey, settling back into the bed while the Healer continued his work. Ian remained at her side, still holding her small hand.

Scott sat down on the other side of the bed and ran a nervous hand through his dark blond hair. "So Wanda," he said after he calmed his nerves, "if we're still going ahead with insanity, did it work? Can you get at Mia's lost memories?"

"I've been trying, but it's not easy. Everything is...well in the wrong place so to speak. It may take me some time to find them."

"Well, you've got until tomorrow morning," said Jason. "Unless Jade decides to start early."
"Hopefully it will not take that long," replied Wanda. She was silent for several moments and then a truly sad expression began on her face.

Concerned, Ian asked, "Wanda, what's wrong?"

Tears glittered on her cheeks. She fought down a sob as she answered, "I see Mia's memories of being taken..." Her eyes shut tight and she weakly moaned out, "No...No..."

Kate looked up and caught Long Rivers' attention. "Mia's heart rate is increasing," she told the Healer. Glancing back to the display she added, "As is the intracranial pressure."

Long Rivers nodded grimly. "Wanderer, you need to relax...Do not let yourself be overwhelmed by her memories."

Wanda sniffed and wiped away at her tears with her free hand. She continued to hold on to Ian's hand, squeezing it for support. Slowly the visage of grief retreated and her body relaxed on the bed. Minutes stretched out while Wanda worked her way through the labyrinth of Mia's memories.

Scott and Jason spoke in hushed whispers in one corner of the room.

Breaking the silence, Kate spoke up. "Wanda, is Mia aware of you? Is it like when you were with Melanie, both of you talking to each other?"

Without opening her eyes she answered, "No...different...hard to explain, Sister Kate."

Kate, Ian, and Long Rivers exchanged troubled looks. Only Mia used that term. Ian turned back to the girl laying on the bed. "Wanda," he said, "remember who you are. Remember where you are."

"I do," said Wanda. Her tone was annoyed. "I'm...I'm..." Her breathing picked up and with effort she forced out - "I am Wanderer!"

Scott came over to Long River and took the Healer's by the arm. Lowering his voice he said, "I think we need to pull the plug on this."

His face hardened with uncertainty but eventually Long Rivers acquiesced. Bending over Mia's body, he said, "Wanderer, this is not working. You are losing yourself to Mia."

Wanda's eyes snapped open again. Taking a steadying breath she shook her head, her dark hair swishing on the pillow. "No...it's alright. I'm making progress..."

She cut off unexpectedly and her hand in Ian's tightened. Going very still, muscles throughout her body stiffen as her eyes widened in shock. Long Rivers was by her side in an instant, alarm quickly growing on his face. But as fast as Wanda's body went taught, it slackened.

"I have it," she announced.

Startled looks passed over everyone in the room. Kate swallowed and resumed her monitoring. Ian found his free hand had tightened into a fist and he forced himself to relax. Long Rivers stood back up, his own hands twitching nervously. Scott and Jason moved closer and the little group formed a circle around Mia's body.

"Wanderer, what do you see?" asked Long Rivers

Her eyes fluttered close as she focused on the memory. "Mia is on a gurney, in a...laboratory, I think...It's hard to see right. I believe she's been drugged. Her body is so sluggish...But I can hear well enough."
"There are people talking...A woman and a man from the sound of their voices." She paused and then said, "The man sounds young, a little nervous. He says - 'Doctor Dobson, I've got instructions to transfer her.' And the woman replies, she's not happy, she says something about it being a waste."

A frown passed over Mia's face. "We're moving now. Being pushed on the bed, I believe. Down a long hallway...More people here...all of them in medical scrubs. One of them comes up, helps the man with moving us along. It's a woman...she smiles...but not at me...it's like she doesn't even see me. She says - 'Alex, coming to game night?' and he replies - 'Sure, Susan, if you're going to be there.'"

Scott looked around at the others. Perplexed he asked, "Game night? Sounds so...ordinary."

Next to him Jason replied, his tone joking, "Got to have some down time when you're cooking up bioweapons and playing mad scientist." No one laughed.

Wanda continued narrating Mia's rediscovered memory. "Now we're moving into...a...not sure what it is. Oh...it's an elevator. Can feel us moving downward." She went silent for several seconds, her eyes shifting rapidly under her eyelids. "The man...the one named Alex is talking again. He says - 'Susan, what's down here? I mean, no one works on the sixth level. Why are we transporting this sample down here?'

But Susan doesn't answer right away, eventually she says something about this being cold storage. Alex is shaking his head, saying something doesn't make sense about this place. Susan says - 'Alex, I know you're new here, but there are rules and security clearances to every place on the base. Everything is compartmentalized. Nobody can know everything. If one of us ever gets taken...'"

Wanda stopped her recount and said, "She sounds so scared."

"Is that really so strange?" replied Kate softly. "The Facility are people. Just like us. They get frightened and sad and they also can be happy and have game nights."

With her eyes still shut, Wanda nodded her head in agreement. "I know. This Alex and Susan are just two normal Humans...I think they like each other."

"So is this it?" questioned Scott. "That all Mia's forgotten memory was, just an overheard conversation between two Facility people? Nothing about other aliens or monsters?"

"No," answered Wanda after a moment. "There's more. We're alone now...the Humans have left us. Can't see well...very dark." She went silent again for a time, her face twitching as her eyes shut tight. "Moving again...strange...the air smells wrong."

"How so?" asked Ian.

Wanda's voice was slurred in her reply, "Ssmells metallic...like c-copper or russelsy iron..."

Kate, who had her eyes glued to the diagnostic display, rose up. "Mia's heart rate is increasing and that EKG-like reading is jumping all over the place."

Long Rivers moved to examine the display for himself. Meanwhile, Wanda continued to chronicle the lost memory as her voice weakened. "Itss...so...cold. Hardly...annny light. Hear sssomething...Voices? No...not people...not speakin. Hootssss...and kliksss..."

Ian had paled as Wanda's voice steadily stuttered and waned. "Wanda, Hon, we're taking you out."
You just hang on."

"No!"

"Dammit, Wanda, don't fight me on this."

But Wanda was beyond hearing. She thrashed about on the bed. Kate and Ian took hold of Mia's small body. Surprisingly, both had to work to hold her down as she continued to flail about.

"Can't be..." moaned out Wanda.

"Hold her still," ordered Long Rivers. "I will apply a dosage of SLEEP."

"Trying," said Kate as she put her weight into clamping down on the still struggling girl.

"No! No! No!" yelled Wanda. Her eyes popped opened and they were wild, frantic, frightened eyes. "They're here! They've been here!"

Long Rives, the SLEEP dispenser in his hand right above her, stopped. "Wanderer," his words hushed, "Who is here?"

Wanda, in Mia's body, sucked in air and then expelled it in one word with all the force her lungs would allow.

"VULTURES!"

Chapter End Notes

The stage is set and the players assembled, at long last we're back to the beginning.
On the TV images of explosions and fire erupted throughout the city. Buildings crumbled while people ran in all directions, desperate to flee the destruction. And through the smoke and ash, something huge moved among the still standing towers.

"Let me get this straight," said Night Ember Lights as he watched the chaos unfolding on the screen. "The large foam rubber monster currently destroying the city is the 'good guy'?"

Eric nodded once. "Yes, that's Godzilla."

"And the other foam rubber monster also currently destroying the city is the 'bad guy'?"

Another nod. "Yes, that's Megalon."

Night Ember Lights or as the Soul was more commonly called – Nigel, looked to the TV and then to Eric. The Human was keenly interested in how the young Soul would react to the movie and was watching him intently. Nigel had not really known what to expect when they had started the video. Eric had said it was one of his favorite things to watch when he was feeling stressed. As Nigel studied the two fake monsters fighting, he was completely perplexed on how that was possible.

Thinking about the Human's tendency for jokes and pranks, Nigel fixed Eric with a discriminating gaze. "You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"Listen, Nigel," lectured Eric, "Godzilla was originally a metaphor for the dangers of nuclear weapons in the 1950s. But by the 70s he was mostly comic relief in increasing ridiculous story lines. Proving that even a serious topic like atomic bombs can be made silly if you have enough cheesy special effects and bad voice dubbing."

Nigel watched as Godzilla's atomic breath blew apart a fake building and shook his head. "But the city is being destroyed, even if it's only a model. That's an awful thing to see. How is any of this funny?"

"Ugh...Souls...Always finding ways to suck the joy out of stuff," complained Eric.

Still muttering to himself Eric got off the couch and pressed the stop button on the DVD player. The old TV display blanked to blue for a moment and then switched back to the regular broadcast. The early morning news was on and the Soul on the screen was reporting on a minor fire in downtown Atlanta being successfully brought under control.

The news was generally dull and most people at the Hotel Rose rarely watched. Mostly they showed Human interest stories, or to be precise - Soul interest stories. Eric listened to the report for a few seconds and then turned the TV off. Fires in other cities were not much of a concern. Eric knew they would soon have more pressing issues much closer to home.

Turning back to Nigel, Eric gave a half-hearted shrug. "Well, Japanese monster movies aren't for everyone. I'd show you some other funny stuff, but after the whole 'Three Stooges incident,' Ian made me swear I'd run it past him first before showing you guys anything else from my movie collection."
"Perhaps it is for the best," replied Nigel. "We have other things to do than watch TV."

"Yeah," Eric agreed somberly. "Again, thanks for coming when Scott called. We were kind of out of ideas about what to do."

Letting out a depressive sigh, Nigel said, "I don't know what I can do really. I have resigned as a Seeker. I can no longer support their goals. When they come, I don't think they'll listen to me."

Eric looked about the room and then made a quick check outside to see if anyone was nearby. His gaze turned restless. "A lot of us are pretty upset," he said in a hushed voice. "Anything you can do to act as a buffer."

Nigel's forehead creased with tension. Nervously he asked, "D-Do you think there will be...fighting?"

"I hope not," replied Eric. "But I don't know what to expect. Everyone is determined to stop the Seekers from taking Mia. Long Rivers is pretty sure if they put another Soul into her, it will kill her. Maybe they'll listen to him. But without Wanda, it makes everything more difficult."

"Might I see them?" requested Nigel.

Eric fumbled with his hands and became just as anxious as the ex-Seeker. "Well...I'm not sure that's a good idea. Long Rivers, Simon, and Annie, are in with Mia and Wanda right now. Kind of tense in there." The pudgy computer hacker's face twisted to a guilty expression. "Actually, I'm supposed to be...umm...baby sitting you," he finally admitted.

Nigel frowned. "I may be young for one of my kind, but I'm not an infant," he said indignantly.

"You are less than five years old. That makes you a kid, even if you are in an adult Human body," protested Eric.

He held up his hands. "Look, I'm just trying to make the best out of a screwed up situation. Last night, against some us objecting, Wanda put her little worm body into Mia. All to track down memories of when Mia was captive of the Facility. Doesn't take long before this craziness starts to go wrong. Wanda, in Mia, starts having some sort of seizure. But before Wanda passes out, she screams her head off about Vultures. And apparently not the feathery Earth kind. Then after putting Wanda back into her original body, neither one of them has woken up."

Eric saw the young Soul shudder at the mention of Vultures. Sitting down next to Nigel, he asked, "Are the Vultures really that scary?"

Nigel looked down at his feet. "I only know from the memories that are from many mothers ago. They are still strong even after all this time. But it's like a dream...or maybe more like a nightmare."

Growing curious, Eric had to wonder. "You guys treat them like they're the bogeyman or something. How do Souls stand living in their bodies?"

"Oh," replied Nigel with a shake of his head. "We don't use their bodies for hosts anymore."

"Why not?"

Nigel made a helpless shrug. "There are no more Vultures, at least not on any of the other worlds. They...died off."
A sense of dread came over Eric. Had the Vultures been so repugnant to the Souls that the aliens had given up using their bodies and completely wiped them out? If humanity became too much of a problem, would the Souls do the same?

"You're telling me you Souls killed them all? Because what they did to you?"

"No! No!" said Nigel emphatically as firmly swayed his head back and forth. "It wasn't us...they had already damaged their egg cycle...and we hadn't found the spiders yet...so we didn't know how to fix it."

Eric could only stare blankly at the studdering Soul. "Uh, umm, what?"

Taking a deep breath and steadying himself, Nigel started over. "The Vultures had polluted and damaged their world quite a lot before they traveled into space. Even on their colony worlds they were messy. But the effect wasn't just limited to their environment. They were damaging themselves. They reproduced through eggs – or something like eggs."

Nigel paused as he considered how to explain to Eric. "I'm not sure I understand this part well...something to do with the protective shell being stable enough to allow the embryos to develop. The genetic damage they did to themselves made it so fewer and fewer eggs would be usable. It started slow, but over time the Vultures could not reproduce correctly. By the time we intervened the process was already well along."

"Wow," breathed Eric.

"So after a while the population began to decline. We did try to fix it, but by the time we found the Spiders and were able to make use of their skills it was too late. Eventually, they died out and we moved on to other worlds. I suppose, in a way, part of our old fears of the Vultures come from our failure."

"It has always remained a lesson to us that we must work hard to save races and worlds before either one becomes too damaged." Nigel gave Eric an appraising look. "In many ways, you Humans and Earth are similar to the way the Vultures were before they traveled the stars."

"We aren't like them," argued Eric. "We don't go around killing and abusing other sentient races for the fun of it." He pointed his finger at Nigel. "You Souls came here and started it with us, not the other way around."

Crestfallen, Nigel replied miserably, "I-I know...We did." However after a few moments, he pursed his lips and spoke with a sterner voice. "But Eric, your kind did damage yourselves from your own waste. How many cancer-causing substances did you use with little restraint? And Humans were destructive to your environment. Maybe they weren't intelligent like you, but a lot of other species would have been wiped out if we hadn't come." He added, "I might be a child, but even I know that's a dumb thing to do."

Eric leaned back, thinking over what Nigel had said. "I suppose your right," he admitted. He then thought about the possibility of Vultures being on Earth. From what Nigel said it would seem to be a complete impossibility. He had always liked to josh with Scott over the ideas of ancient aliens. The ever scientific Scott always demanded proof and hard data. Eric had more imagination than the younger man. With so much history unrecorded anything was possible. But even he had treated the idea of prehistoric contact with aliens as an intellectual exercise. Just an interesting tidbit.

But if the Vultures were at the Facility and had been here for centuries – what did that mean? More importantly, what would happen when the Seekers finally tracked the Facility down and found the
"Hey, Stats?"

Statistics Gatherer looked up from his monitor and saw Alight on the Yellow Waters, or Ally for short, standing in the doorway to his office with a slightly perturbed smile. Her dark hair shiny and immaculately straight, framing her always pleasing to the eye facial features. It made her discordant smile stand out prominently. A quick glance at the time told him she should be in wardrobe, getting ready for the morning's broadcast. That she was here instead had him out of his chair and by her side.

Concerned, he asked, "Ally, what's wrong? Are you having...butterflies in the stomach again?" He was always impressed by the strength of their host bodies' emotions. How simple emotions like anxiety or doubt could cause such powerful physical reactions. As a Spider his emotions had been so limited, he had never realized what he had been missing.

"Oh," said Ally quickly, "it's not that. I just was wondering if I was still going on today..." She trailed off with another uneasy smile.

"Why wouldn't you?"

She shuffled her feet. "Well, it's because Gloria is back."

Stats started in surprise. "Really? When did she get in?"

"Just a few minutes ago," explained Ally. "Gloria and some people I don't know went straight to her dressing room." Still looking a little unsettled, she added, "Does this mean Gloria is doing the show?"

Stats suppressed a small sigh. Gloria was the beloved anchor on their show 'Good Morning LA.' Her bright sunny smiles and matching golden blonde hair had made the show one of the most popular in the city. Whether she was covering the latest sports, reporting on the always fantastic California weather, or interviewing someone in the studio, Gloria always made you feel so comfortable and happy. And with her beautiful and graceful host body she had any number of admirers, including Stats himself.

So when Gloria had called him a week ago and told him she needed some time off he had felt a bit disappointed. He would miss her smile and cheerful laughter. But she certainly had not sounded like herself on the phone. She seemed...upset. Gloria must have really needed the vacation.

Since then Ally had been taking her place on the show. If Gloria had indeed returned, Ally would be back to reporting on city's traffic conditions. And hence his subdued sigh. He knew Ally was a little jealous of Gloria. Such an adverse emotion was not very becoming of a Soul, but it was understandable, it was hard to compare to Gloria.

Giving Ally's arm a comforting squeeze he told her, "Don't you worry. I will find out."

He made his way out of his office and then down past the studio's stage where everyone was working diligently to get ready for the morning broadcast. He waved at a few of the crew, and they returned the greeting with pleasant smiles. Then turning away from the stage, he walked down to a side hallway and then onto Gloria's dressing room.
As he approached her room, he heard Gloria's voice. It was loud enough to carry through the closed door. Her tone was higher than normal. Stressed and uncertain.

"I can't do this," she said, "They'll see! They'll know!"

At her door, Stats heard an unfamiliar voice of a man answer her. "Not a problem, Gloria. A little gift from Mr. Williams."

"Oh, how clever," came Gloria's voice in reply.

Now more than a little worried, he knocked on her door. "Gloria, it's Stats. Is everything alright? May I come in?"

A lengthy silence followed and then the door slowly opened. Stats could see Gloria sitting in her makeup chair. She was doing something very odd, one hand was pulling back on her eyelid while the other was pressing something to her eye.

The situation was so strange Stats felt a surreal moment of disorientation. Without warning a big man with wide shoulders appeared in the doorway. Stats gaped at him. The man was not anyone Stats knew. But the scowl on the stranger's broad face sent a shiver through him. He meant to step back, turn and run, but his body had frozen in fear.

Reaching out, the unknown man grabbed and effortlessly yanked him into the dressing room. More hands seized him. Stats tried to cry out, but the palm of the big man smothered his mouth and stifled his scream. The door slammed shut behind him and someone kicked at his leg. He was forced to his knees before Gloria's chair.

She twisted her head to look down at him. Stats gaped as he saw the eye she had just been manipulating had a ring of silver around the iris. Her other eye had none.

"It's name is Statistics Gatherer," said Gloria. Her tone towards him was so cold. A note of anxiety crept back into her next words. "It's the station's production manager. They'll come looking for It soon."

From behind him, the unknown man spoke. "Don't worry about a thing Gloria. You just go on the air and report everything is fine. Keep the worms nice and calm." The hands gripping Stats tightened and the man added darkly, "We'll handle the rest."

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"Baby..." started Kyle as he watched the woman curled into a ball in the back seat of the Jeep, "You sure you don't need something more to drink?"

Her curly hair hung limply around her head and shoulders. A fine powdering of ash still clung to her dark strands. The hair almost entirely obscured her face. Only a little lay pushed to the side to expose her brow and closed eyes. She was very still but was not sleeping. "No," she said faintly, "I'm fine."

"Because...I mean...I guess you're kind of dehydrated," stammered Kyle. He reached back and offered her a bottle of water. "You should...you know...keep drinking."

Without opening her eyes, she snapped at him, "I said I'm fine!"
Kyle recoiled, looking like a beaten puppy. He continued to watch her un-moving form. Eventually, he turned back in his seat and stared out the window, his eyes focused on nothing.

In the driver's seat, Jared glanced into the rear view mirror and eyed her. Somehow she had coiled herself into an even tighter ball. After escaping the burning hospital and evading the group of stunned Souls outside, they had reached his Jeep and made a quick get away. After that, bit by bit, she had told what had happened to her since the day in the farmer's market. What she had revealed defied belief. It was seemingly the impossible. Now she lay in the back seat, physically and emotionally drained. He wanted to let her be. Give her time to rest and recuperate. But he did not have that option.

Clearing his throat, Jared said, "Jodi..." It was so strange to be calling her by that name. "I know you're tired, but we need to know where the others went. Where they took Melanie."

"I told you," replied Jodi with an irritated sigh, "I don't know. By the time I got out that hellhole of a morgue they had already started that fire."

"You must know something," persisted Jared. "You were with them for days. Maybe something you overheard or saw."

Around them, the traffic was slowing and Jared refocused his eyes on the road. A rustling came from the back seat. He was rather surprised when he glanced again into the mirror and saw Jodi had pulled out of her ball. She brushed her hair back and Jared saw the bandage he had affixed to her temple. Noticing him looking at her in the mirror, Jodi turned her dark and angry eyes on him.

"Sunny said you were smart," stated Jodi flatly. "Right now I don't see it."

"Jodi, please, I know how totally screwed up everything is," pleaded Kyle. "But Jared is just trying to figure things out. Maybe...Maybe if you talk to Sunny, she can help you remember something."

"Lughead," grumbled an annoyed Jodi, "You're so not helping."

Kyle was quiet for a moment and then he threw his head back and laughed uproariously. "I...I haven't been called that in so long," he chuckled out.

Jared saw a flicker of a smile on Jodi's lips. Her feelings towards Kyle seemed to be seesawing between anger and joy. Happy at their reunion, but more than a little pissed at his previous relationship with Sunny. He could only guess how Sunny felt about reuniting with Kyle. Jared shook his head, he had thought the bizarre love triangle between himself, Mel, and Wanda had been a headache. He had only sympathy for Kyle.

In the east, the early rays of the rising sun were just beginning to glint over the San Gabriel Mountains. They had been driving more or less at random for the last hour, vainly hoping to pick up some clue to where the people from the hospital in Banning had gone. With daybreak fast approaching, traffic on the highway was steadily rising. They would have to pick a destination soon, or be stuck in the morning rush-hour.

It had gone quiet in the Jeep. The only sound the steady rhythm of the tires of the Jeep rolling on the road. The silence was finally broken when Kyle offered up a suggestion. "I'm going to say something really stupid," he said, "but hear me out."

"What?" asked both Jared and Jodi.

"Its just the three of us and we're not having any luck. So let's go to the Souls and tell them what happened. Get them to help." Kyle let out a small sigh of self-derision. "Yeah, I know, stupid."
Jared's first impulse was to call the plan insane. But he resisted his instinct and tried to give Kyle's idea at least some consideration. Williams had been so worried they might go to the Souls that he had locked them up for days. Given what Mel had told him about the Facility's activities in Chicago it was very likely Williams was planning on some sort of terrorist-like activity.

"It's not that its stupid," said Jared after thinking about it. "But I'm not sure what to tell them. Do we say – Hey, Vultures are somehow here on Earth, for who knows how long, involved in a genetic manipulation of humanity to breed resistance to the Souls. That these same Vultures are allied in some fashion to a bunch of freed Humans who have been brought back by an unknown and possibly unstable drug called CURE. Who are now planning who knows what."

He laughed bitterly. "That sounds completely nuts to me." Glancing back into the review mirror he added, "Not that I think you're lying Jodi, but you've got to admit what you've told us is pretty out there."

Jodi added a bitter laugh of her own. "Hell, I was there, even I don't believe it."

"Well," countered Kyle, "we don't go into the...stranger parts. We just tell them the Facility is involved and unless they want a repeat of Chicago they need to find these guys."

Mulling it over, Jared weighing the pros and cons of going to the Souls. But then Jodi interrupted his contemplation. "Kyle, what are you talking about? What did the Facility do in Chicago?"

Jared was initially confused by Jodi's question. Kyle, however, recognized the problem immediately. "Right," he said with an irritated click of his tongue, "You only know what Sunny knows. And we didn't tell Sunny about everything that happened in Chicago."

"Huh?" asked a bewildered Jodi.

With a tired sigh, Kyle began to fill in all the details of Melanie's and Wanda's expedition to Chicago. She listened wordlessly as Kyle explained what had happened and what they had learned. When he was done, Jodi let out an annoyed groan. "Yeah, that would have been nice to know," she snipped sarcastically.

"We were trying to protect Sunny. We didn't want to scare her," explained Jared.

"Yes, poor, innocent Sunny," she ridiculed. "Too fragile and naive to know the truth. Better to treat her like a child." To Jared it seemed Jodi was moreover criticizing the alien in her head than either Kyle or himself.

Kyle's face twisted sorrowfully. "Jodi, don't be angry. If I even thought for a second you would run into these freaks I would have told you..." and his expression grew very befuddled as he tried to continue. "Or, well...Sunny...I mean..."

"I know what you mean!" growled Jodi through gritted teeth. After taking a few moments to cool down, she sobered and reflected. "As for your plan to tattle to the Souls? I'm not sure it even matters. They would go to the Seekers, and I heard Smith talking about operations to capture the remaining ones in the city. By now they're all are either converted back as humans or dead."

"They could really pull that off? Get all the Seekers without the other Souls noticing?" questioned Kyle.

Jodi was quiet, her eyes distant. "Since this area has been 'settled' and there is little to no human activity, the Souls don't need thousands of Seekers, even for a city the size of LA. The policing force would be small, maybe just around a hundred." She paused again and added, "From what I
saw, it is entirely possible. Maybe they wouldn't be able to fool the Souls for long, but long enough to start whatever they're planning."

Jared began to play the scenario out in his head. The Souls would naturally want to go the Seekers. They were the guardians against the wild and dangerous Humans. But now those Seekers had been replaced with the very Humans they would be warning them about. "Even if we tell them and get them to believe all this, the best the Souls could do would be to call in reinforcements from other cities. That will take too much time."

"Then we're back to figuring it ourselves," sighed Kyle. Jared and Jodi nodded wearily.

"Jodi," asked Jared, "how much of that CURE stuff did they have?"

"I'm not sure. I know they had small aerosol cans of the stuff and some larger gas grenades. Everyone was told to be real careful when using it. Not to use too much."

"If they had a whole lot of it, they would have just started spraying it all over the place. Gas the entire city," reasoned Jared. "But they didn't. So they must not have an unlimited supply of the stuff."

"Alright," agreed Jodi, "that's probably true." Still looking very frail and tired, she leaned back in the seat. Her eyes fluttered close, but she continued to speak. "I remember Smith talking about delivering a huge blow to the Souls. I guess a mass fumigation of the city is out. From what you've told me the Facility sounds more like a kill-anyone-who-gets-in-our-way type of people."

"Yeah, they don't seem to mind the collateral damage," brooded Kyle.

"So they're going for the big hit, likely in the city. We can figure that much out," said Jared thoughtfully. "But it still comes back to where?"

With a shrug, Kyle replied, "Where they would do the most damage." He glanced back to where Jodi lay resting. "These guys know the Souls. Know where they're the weakest."

Jodi had drifted into a sullen silence which went on long enough for Jared to wonder if she had fallen asleep. But then a tired groan came from the back seat. "Sunny," said Jodi with a note of weary contempt, "is worried about the Souls stored in the cryotanks. She says that's where her people are most vulnerable."

"Hmm," continued Jodi. Her eyes were open again, focused in thought. The internal conversation with Sunny had evidently lead to some type of revelation "That Soul I helped captured. The one who flirted with me. Where did he say he worked?"

Kyle frowned. "What? Who was flirting with you?"

"What guy?" asked Jared, wondering what Jodi was driving at.

Without answering Jodi's expression turned tight with concentration. "He was an electrician at...LAX." Slowly nodding to herself she began to explain. "When I was at the hospital I helped capture Souls. Samantha was looking for particular ones...Usually Healers and Seekers....who could go missing, at least for a little while, before someone would notice. But I remember bringing in this one guy. He had just moved here and started a job at the airport."

"And the airports are where the Souls are loading and unloading all the cryotanks," said Jared. He felt his pulse quicken, Jodi and Sunny could be on to something.
With a grim nod, Kyle added, "And remember the Facility people blew up one of the Soul's spaceships before. Destroyed a bunch of cryotanks. Melanie said that got the Souls really worked up."

Jared eyed the highway, a steady stream of cars and trucks were mingling as the morning commute began to hit full swing. Beyond the freeway lay the towers of iron and steel of the downtown lit up a soft orange by the rising sun. LAX was clear across the city. It would take a good deal of time to get there.

"Are we in agreement? We try for the airport?" urged Jared.

"It may be a bit of a long shot," offered Jodi. "But it's the best I can come up with. I say go." Kyle also nodded his assent.

Pushing down on the gas, Jared pulled ahead of some slower moving cars. His thoughts already moving from how to find Mel to how to rescue her. His momentary panic at the construction trap had landed them in this mess. Now he was determined to rectify his mistake.

"Hey Hue," called out Sandy when he recognized the wiry frame of his coworker. "Welcome back."

Hue of the Crimson Light was standing at a junction box mounted on the cinder block wall. He was deeply engrossed in his work and did not turn around. His hands were busy, apparently in the middle of a rewiring job. Coming up behind him, Sandy saw Hue's body stiffen at his approach.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't be interrupting you while you work," apologized Sandy.

"Err...ahh...No...umm...Sandy," stuttered Hue without turning from his task. He rolled his thin shoulders and let out a deep sigh. "It's alright," Hue said with better composure, "I'm nearly done here."

"Well, okay," responded Sandy, a little confused by the other man's answer. Hue must be still getting back into the swing of things from his time off.

Pulling a pair of pliers from his tool belt, Hue began to remove several black rubber cable connectors. He was silent as he worked. Waiting for him to finish, Sandy made a quick bob with his head, looking up and down the narrow passageway. Along the wall countless tubes and pipes twisted and turned. Many of the conduits arched up and vanished into the high ceiling, traveling to points all over the airport. The far end of the corridor twisted to left and disappeared into a dimly lit passageway. It led to more cramped utility and service spaces for the other terminals. Behind him was a dull gray steel door leading back towards the hustle and bustle of the main airport. But back here in these utility tunnels, the constant noise of thousands of travelers was just distant babble.

"So," began Sandy, feeling the need to fill the quiet with some sort of conversation. "Shadow Leaves and I have this neighbor. Her name is Blaze of the Blossoms. From Fire World..." He hesitated and then quickly added, "But don't hold that against her. She's a perfectly nice girl."

Pausing but not looking up, Hue said, "You're trying to set me up on a...date?"

Sandy felt himself blush. "Well...I mean...you're new around here and I've heard you've been looking for a partner. I was telling this to Shadow, and she suggested Blossom. Maybe we could all
go out for dinner?"

Hue made an amused shake of his head. "Something tells me she really wouldn't like me." An odd tone came into his voice. "But then again, Souls are so eager to be helpful. Maybe she'd want to make me happy."

"Umm...Hue, are you okay?" questioned Sandy. He leaned in closer and laid a gentle hand on Hue's arm. Trying to make sure his friend was alright. He was acting very strangely. It was then he saw clearly what Hue was doing. The wiring in the junction box he was working on carried the main telephone and data lines for the terminal. And Hue had systematically cut every wire.

"Hue! What are you doing!?!" cried Sandy.

Ripping his arm violently away, Hue spun on Sandy and growled out, "My name is Brian!"

Sandy backed away, his eyes going wide in fear. Still glaring at him, 'Brian' pulled a two-way radio from tool belt and spoke into the device. "The main terminal is dead in the water. But I've got a bugger here."

Then Sandy was running as fast as he could. Back down the constricted path, returning to safety. He had to warn someone. No, he had to warn everyone. He did not know how it was possible but Hue was gone and his Human host was apparently committing some type of dreadful sabotage.

With his heart pounded in his chest, Sandy burst through the steel door. Then down another narrow hallway and a turn to his right. Then he was in a large storage room. Neat rows of storage bins lined the walls. From here it was a quick path back to the main concourse.

He sucked in air and tried to bring himself a measure of calm. The sound of a door slamming open ruined it. Panicked, he spun about, fearful the Human was after him. But the door behind him was closed. Two people raced into the supply room from a separate entrance and Sandy was never so relieved to see their black dress uniforms.

"Seekers!" he gasped breathlessly as he ran to them. "Something terrible has happened!"

The two Seekers, a man and a woman, shared a look and smiled together. "Yes," said the woman, "something terrible has happened."

"Then you know. Hue's host..." gulped out Sandy. But he got no further when the man stepped forward. Sandy saw he carried a small gray canister. The Seeker raised his hand and a puff of dark smoke jutted from it. The powerful reeking smell of sulfur filled Sandy's nose.

As a biting cold went through him, Sandy heard the last words he would ever hear - "And we're here to fix it."

"So where was your's from?" asked Mandy.

Noah was looking through his binoculars, watching the parasites work on one of the wide body spaceships. They were carefully loading stacks of silvery cryotanks on to the massive vessels. He counted nine ships on the field. Beyond the ships lay a pair of arched buildings, enormous aircraft hangars re-purposed for performing maintenance on the Soul's ships. From their location in the van, it was impossible to tell how many more of the large white craft were inside the hangers.
Putting down the binoculars, he turned to Mandy. She was slouching in the van's passenger seat and her dark auburn hair, really more brown with a tint of red, hung down, framing her freckled face. It made her look young, even though she was thirty-seven and more than five years older than himself.

"Mine's originally from that spider planet," he told her as he thought about the alien creature still attached to his brain. It was such a peculiar feeling, going through its memories, particularly when reviewing the parasite's time of living on that other planet. It was hard for his human mind to fathom the astonishing amount of information the alien spiders could handle. Numbers and equations flowed like a swift stream. Comprehending how to build machines the size of a molecule or power a spaceship to reach the stars. But he did not need to understand how all the Soul's technology worked. He just needed to know how to access those ships.

"The one I had was from Flower world. Four life terms before It came here," said Mandy glumly.

Checking his watch, Noah wondered what was taking so long. He was beginning to feel more than a little nervous, exposed as they were on the airport's tarmac. Absently he asked, "So why did It leave? Why come to Earth?"

"Because It got bored being a plant. Wanted some excitement." She smiled thinly and added with contempt. "Well, It got its wish. Had seven years of living in my body. But all adventures have to come to an end."

"You dump yours or stick it in a tank?"

"Disposed of as fast as possible," replied Mandy evenly. "Mine just finger painting all day long, like some child. Completely wasted my life. I didn't feel bad at all about wasting it." She arched an eyebrow and asked. "Do you disapprove? I know a few people decided to hold on to theirs."

"No," answered Noah. With a small shudder, he tapped the back of his neck where the sleeping parasite lay. "But I still need mine for this job. After that, I don't know." He sighed, "A lot of them are going to die today. So I guess what's one more?"

Mandy made a small inclination of her head, agreeing with him. She blew out a breath, strong enough to make her bangs flutter. "Let's get on with it," she muttered.

Two more minutes slowly ticked by. Noah was once again scanning the ongoing work on the spaceships when the walkie-talkie let out a squawk. The noise startled him and he almost dropped the binoculars. He was going to reach for radio for the dashboard, but Mandy beat him to it.

Snatching it up, she spoke into the box. "This is team three, we ready?"

"Nearly," came the voice of Madison Brinsfield. "Everyone get frosty and stay alert. We're going to start any minute."

Craig Williams watched as Madison finished contacting the other teams. They were in place and they were as ready as they would ever be. He turned about in the storage room that had become their staging area. A short walk out the door would lead right into the center of Los Angeles International Airport. The supply room was crowded now. Twenty-five people made the most of sitting or standing in this cramped space. All of them dressed in Seeker uniforms and all of them waiting for his command.
Pulling out his own radio, he stepped into the middle of the tightly packed room. They encircled him. His people. Joe, Madison, Tom, Jeremy, Sam, Lisa, Brian, and all the others. All those they had won back. All of them Human...more or less. Some retained the sleeping alien parasite in their brains. Still useful for a source of information as his forces carried out the mission. Others had discarded their Souls earlier this morning. No longer needed. Their bodies were now immune.

It was time. Twenty years in the Marines had granted him a voice to give orders. Pressing down on the radio's send button he began. Every one of his people needed to hear. "Alright, listen up," he commanded. His words were not strident, but they cut with an iron authority and he had their complete attention.

"Each of you have your orders. Stick to your assigned groups. Check in often with your team leaders. We need to move quickly. Do not worry about individual Souls or small groups. Disband them fast and move on."

He pointed to where the slumped form of a sleeping man lay on the ground. "We used CURE to take down an unexpected guest quietly. But our supplies have run low. We must conserve what we have left."

"So if there is any form of resistance, we take it down quickly and permanently. Do you get me?"

Nods and approvals from everyone in the room and beyond. They had all been through the gauntlet. Each of them had to make the hard realization they would not be saving everyone. Many would have to be sacrificed if any of them were to survive. But understanding that and feeling it in your gut were two separate things. Craig could see it in their eyes, hear it in their voices.

He let the edge out of his voice, said his words in softer tones.

"Today is the day we take our world back. Today is the day we take our lives back. To show the invaders they can't have our world without a fight. And we will fight them with everything we have right down to our bare hands."

"I know I haven't been straight with you on everything. I did not tell you about how I came to be. That I still have one of them tied to my brain. It will always be there, there's no way to cut it out. I didn't tell you that the Facility has done more than a few questionable things. And I'm sorry for that. But our actions were always to fight the invasion. We've always been fighting for you. If Smith had not had his accident, I know he would be here telling you exactly the same thing."

"And I know you've been through hell. I know plenty of you are still in hell. Suffering. Scared. Angry. I've been there myself. Feeling as if a mountain was on you. Shoving you down into the ground with the knowledge your whole world is gone. Thinking there's no hope." He spoke slowly, deliberately, letting the weight of his words sink in.

"But as long as one of us is alive, we're not done. As long as one of us breathes, we're not done!" He saw the resolve and determination build in them, like the hardening of steel. "As long as one of us can fight..."

"We're not done!" they all shouted in unison. He felt an immediate swell of pride.

He gave one final command to those listening in on the two-way radio to provide them with a two-minute count and then proceed. After that, he and the rest of his team began their march. Craig led the way and they followed. Out of the tight storage space, down the bare hallway, and then out into the heart of LAX.
Craig let out a long breath as if he had been holding it in for years. After all his patient planning, his hour had come around at last. Melanie was safely locked away. He would speak with her once they were done here. She was still coming to terms with the truth. The others did not know. They were not ready for it. In time they would be, but for now, the mission had to be everything.

The team still playing their roles at the downtown Seeker headquarters had reported they had received panic calls from some parasites at Banning. Apparently, two Humans matching the descriptions of Jared and Kyle had been seen running into the burning hospital. Craig had to give the two credit, they were damn determined to rescue Melanie. If there had been time and the manpower he would have brought the two with them. But in the chaos of Smith's 'accident,' he needed his people close. He had to gain control and their trust. If Jared or Kyle did figure out what they were planning and tried to interfere, he had more than enough people to take care of them.

As he mused about what to do about the two men, he felt Pale Light Gleaming stir within him. It had been a while since he felt his former 'self.' Buried and trapped in the back of his mind. It was making its presences know. His parasite still troubled for what lay ahead.

"You know this is for the best. At least some of your people will survive under my rule," and he pressed the lesser mind back into dark depths of his brain.

Pushing all those thoughts away, Craig focused on the scene before him. The Los Angeles Airport was a vast sprawl of buildings, terminals, hangers, and parking lots. All functioning as well oiled machine to provide transport for tens of thousands of passengers. A system that Craig and the others were going to smash.

They had entered into one of the main check-in lobbies. A massive area, bigger than an auditorium lay before them. People, swaps of people, were lined up to get on board one of the countless shuttles continuously streaming in and out of the airport. Others were saying goodbyes. Families getting ready to go on vacation. Business travelers on their cell phones. Young, old, child, adult, all of them Souls.

Even with parasites' natural tendency towards soft voices, the sheer amount of people talking still created a constant babble of noise. And from the sound of things, something was going wrong. Thanks to Brian's handiwork, the entire check-in process was beginning to fail. Computer programs were not responding. The phones not working. A slow but building confusion was growing among the airport employees and the travelers.

No one in the crowds had noticed them yet. Too busy with their day to day affairs or tracking down why all the landlines were dead. Pulling his gun from its holster, Craig pointed towards the high ceiling above and pulled the trigger twice.

The two booming shots echoed through the entire concourse and stopped everyone in their tracks. Surprised faces all turned towards the noise. Their expressions were still ones of confusion, not fear. For how many Souls knew what a gun was? Had ever heard one fired? In the world of the peaceful Souls, they were largely an unknown.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" shouted Craig as he lowered his arm to his side. "I need your complete and undivided attention!"

Obediently, they did. The entire mass of Souls quietly focused on Craig. "We," and he made the smallest wave of his hand to his team, "are in the process of reacquiring this establishment! I need all of you to return to your places of residence or business! Be patient while we make a few corrections!"
Puzzled and concerned stares were the only reply. Some of the closest were beginning to realize something was very wrong with this unknown group of people dressed like Seekers.

Craig smiled wildly. "I seem to be over-explaining," he said. Bringing his weapon up, he leveled it at the crowds. The rest of his team did the same. Then to their shocked faces, he roared, "I. SAID. RUN!"

"Showtime!" cried Mandy, and Noah could not help the grin that spread on his face.

Putting the van in drive, he accelerated down the tarmac. Around the Souls' starships there were any number of vans and trucks, busy with unloading supplies for the vessels. They would be barely noticed as they approached. Noah was focused on their destination, the nearest hanger when far off to his left a huge ball of fire erupted. A glut of flame and black smoke roiled upward. He heard the resulting concussive blast half a second later. Even inside the van, the sound was deafening. Team two had just detonated their tanker truck.

Around the airstrip activities ground to a halt. Everyone's attention was on the billowing black, oily clouds coming from down the airfield. Soon people were dropping what they were doing and rushing towards the fire, eager to help. It would make things much easier.

The hangar doors were wide open and Noah drove right through and into the inside of the enormous building. Steel girders arched high above them. Spaced at regular intervals were high powered halogen lamps. Their bright white light illuminated the three Soul spaceships undergoing maintenance and repair. Each ship's main hatchways were wide open, allowing for easy access to the crew compartments and cargo hold.

Coming to a stop next to one of the craft, Noah turned off the van's engine. He turned to Mandy. "You ready?" She was staring at the nearby spaceship, her eyes wide. "Yeah," she said slowly.

Other than the noise of the detonation, being inside the van had cut out most of the sounds from around the airport. The Souls' shuttles were comparatively silent to humanity's noisy jetliners and while waiting it had been quiet. Even at the always busy LAX. But now, stepping out into the cool shade of the hangar, Noah was accosted by the sounds sirens cutting through the air.

From inside the building, he could see the dingy smoke of the fire was beginning to dissipate. By now fire teams had already been dispatched. Their distraction was not going to last long, but then they did need it to. Going to the back of the van, Noah opened the door and Mandy surveyed their cargo.

They had just started when the sound of tires squealing had them spinning around, alarmed and reaching for their guns. A pickup truck with several people riding in the back came careening into view. It braked hard and came to a stuttering stop before them.

"Man, did you see that explosion!" whooped Tyler from the back of the truck. He was already climbing over the side before the vehicle's engine sputtered to a stop. At seventeen he was the youngest they had successfully brought back. Some saw his recovery as a sign of great hope. Others, like Noah, saw him as a typical pain-in-the-ass teenager.

Mandy drew out a sharp sigh. Noah could tell she did not care much for Tyler either. "You blew up about eight thousand gallons of gasoline. Everyone in a two-mile radius noticed."
The rest of the second team - Connie, Diego, Elliot, and Liang Chu got out of the back of the truck to gather by Tyler. In the driver's seat Jake soon followed. Joining the rest, the older man took in the three spaceships. He let a low whistle. "So these are real UFOs?"

"More or less," said Noah. "Specifically, they are interstellar ships designed to transport the Souls' cryotanks from one colony world to another."

As a group they walked back to the van and started the process of unloading their cargo. With the entire team gathered it did not take them long. Jake, Elliot, and Diego pulled out the specially designed equipment while Connie, Liang, and Mandy began to assemble it. Noah was concentrating on the next steps, going through the memories of the parasite still attached to his brain. All the while in the background he heard Tyler burbling excitedly about their mission.

"Wish he'd just shut up..." grumbled Noah under his breath.

"Hello?" came a voice from the nearby ship. Everyone turned to see a middle-aged man standing in the nearest ship's hatchway. He was dressed in a dark blue jumpsuit with a small stain of something purplish on his sleeve. He gave them a confused stare. "I was working in the back of the ship...what's all this commotion?"

"Worm!" snarled Tyler.

The man's silver ringed eyes went wide and before anyone could stop him, Tyler drew his gun and pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot echoed around the hangar. A large blot of dark red formed on the man's chest and soaked into his blue uniform. He stumbled back and then simply collapsed in a heap, right against the spaceship's hatch door. A befuddled expression forever frozen on his face.

"Goddamn it!" yelled Jake as he ran up to Tyler and grabbed the boy's gun. Pocketing the firearm, he continued to berate the teen. "I said not to use this unless I told you!"

Tyler snorted. "Why? It was a parasite! Aren't we supposed to be killing them?"

Jake sighed with the frustration that can only come from dealing with an over-excited teenager. "We can't go around killing each and every one. We don't have the ammunition for it."

"Or shooting near the ships," added Noah. "They have more than a few sensitive parts that don't react well to bullets."

Tyler gave a subdued shrug. "Sorry," he mumbled. Looking sullenly at Jake and his confiscated weapon he then asked, "Can I have my gun back?"

"I think I'll hold on to it for now," replied Jake with a firm shake of his head.

"Let's get going," interjected Mandy when Tyler started to complain. Looking up at the massive ship in front of them, she added, "We've got a lot of work to do."

Chapter End Notes

While the ultimate fate of the Vultures' civilization is made up, to me it felt like a
realistic outcome from what little we learn of them from the original novel.

As usual, read, review, and enjoy.
She was lost.

A million memories surrounded her. Encircling her like a swarm of stars in the night sky, each a glittering jewel of recollection. She tried to find her way, but she did not know where to go. Drawing near one of the memories, she was pulled into it without warning...

"Mommy, I don't want to go to school," said the child. Her mother beamed warmly and gave her a comforting hug. "Don't worry little Mia. You'll love it. I know you'll make new friends."

She was confused. Who was the child? Who was the woman? Another image came...

"See Brother Marc!" yelled the girl, excited at her ability to navigate the treacherous path. She stood on the narrow ledge, a bottomless black pit in front of her. She balanced with remarkable ease as she traveled on the constricted rim. Behind her, in the dim darkness, a tall young man with spiky brown hair clapped his hands and said, "Very good. Mia, you're a natural."

Was she Mia? Was that her name? More memories came, faster than before...

"Whisper Winds, may I help you with the dishes?" asked Mia as the other Soul cleaned up after dinner...

"Mia! Get down from there!" scolded the old Nun as Mia hung from the old pipes in the shower room...

"Hello, my name is Mia!" said the girl as she grinned at the fair-skinned, blond-haired Soul like a wolf might smile at young fawn in the woods...

The woman with the waves of golden hair and blue-gray eyes, she knew her. Her name was...Melanie. No that was not right. Petals Open to the Moon? No...still the wrong name. Who was she?

Trying to find answers, she tried to pull away from the countless slivers of memories. They were not shiny gems, but shards of sharp glass. And they cut into her...

The black-eyed monster of a man stood over her. He is a killer. He murdered Tim. He bent down and closed the distance to her. Asking if, like him, she is also from the Facility.

The Facility. She had been looking through memories for the Facility. It was important. Something was there. Something dark and hateful. She had to remember. It was why she was here...

"Doctor Dobson, I've got instructions to transfer her..."

Midnight blackness surrounded her. But there are sounds in the dark. Hoots and clicks. A language never uttered by a Human was being spoken... Then they were there... The Vultures. Three of them, tall and thin, with dull gray skin. Their wings enfolded and wrapped around their bodies, like shaded cloaks. Their burning yellow-red eyes glared balefully.

A man speaks. He has a gaunt face and thinning hair. Glowering angrily at the Vultures, he
questioned them. "What is the point of these experiments? What could you possibly learn from sewing parasites into their brains?"

Warbling hoots come from the Vultures and understandable words soon follow in an artificial voice. "There is much we need to know about how the parasites control your bodies."

"You promised to help us!" shouted the man.

One of the Vultures answered, "Patience, Major Ashby."

"We are losing this war. You know how to fight the parasites, what are you waiting for!?"

The Vultures were silent for a long time. Finally, the false machine voice replied, "We are few and our strength is almost gone. Your kind must be ones to carry the battle."

The man named Ashby scowled and turned on his heel, marching away furious. The Vultures watched him leave. More hoots and clicks came from their lipless mouths. Even though the Human was far away and out of earshot, their words were still translated.

"The weapons are nearly ready."

The Vultures, that was the memory she had been searching for in this dark place. There should be none alive. They should be long gone, living on now as nothing but memories passed down from one generation to the next. But what she had seen was not a twisting of fact and fiction turned into a nightmare. It was a real. Somehow, someway, they had found their way to Earth. They were working with the Humans. Planning, preparing...

"The weapons are nearly ready."

The others must be warned. She had to find her way back. How did she leave this place?

"Help me!" she cried into the darkness. Hoping someone might hear her. But there was no reply in this shadowy place, lighted only by the embers of memories. She began to run, trying to escape. Rushing away from the shards of the past, she ran as fast as she could, but no matter the direction she traveled the darkness and the endless memories remained.

She was lost.

"Just a guess, but I think this is the right place."

Kyle's comment was the understatement of the year, thought Jodi as she surveyed the mass of people streaming from the airport's terminals. They joined an already large group assembled in the shadow of the Theme Building, the distinctive circular structure in the center of LAX. The white stucco building resembled alien craft which had just landed on its four arched legs. The comparison was fitting as the crowds surrounding it were made up of Souls.

"I see a lot of smoke come from somewhere on the runway." spoke up Jared. His hands were tight on his Jeep's steering wheel as he attempted to navigate the swarm of vehicles madly trying to enter and exit the surrounding parking lots. With a disturbed shake of his head, he added, "I think they blew up a shuttle or something. So much for stopping this insanity before it started."
They veered past a group of Souls. Two stocky men were carrying a woman. Bright red blood was covering her forehead and running down across her face. She was not moving as the men transported her and Jodi could not tell if she was alive or dead.

"Put your sunglasses on," instructed Jared. "I don't want to give ourselves away if we can help it."

Jodi pulled a pair Kyle had given her from her pants pocket. As she put them on she felt Sunny writhe within her, aggrieved over the unfolding carnage. She desperately wanted to run into the mob of Souls and help her injured people. But she was still firmly stuck in the back of her head, unable to do anything. Jodi found herself pleased by this fact.

Beyond their earlier brief collaboration on figuring out where the recently freed humans had gone, Jodi had pushed the Soul away. She was furious with the alien in the back of her head, everything that had gone wrong with her life was Sunny's fault. And she was enraged with Kyle for loving Sunny, it was so clear when he had swooped in to rescue her. His face had radiated absolute joy at seeing her - Sunny, not Jodi. She had been giving both of them the silent treatment since they headed towards the airport.

'I said I was sorry,' intoned Sunny for something like the tenth time. 'You can be mad at me if you want, but it's not right to blame Kyle. How was he supposed to know it was you and not me?'

'It doesn't matter what he knew. I've seen it in your memories. It was more than just you wanting him. Maybe it didn't start out that way, but it's clear to me he's been feeling the same way for a while.' Jodi was annoyed her admission brought a little thrill of joy to Sunny.

'How can you possibly love him?' pressed Jodi. 'He's not a Soul. He can't love the real you.'

'I don't know;' sniffed Sunny defensively. 'I just do. The dreams I used to have...'

Jodi irritably interrupted, 'Those dreams were my memories. You don't have anything to even base a relationship.'

'Fine!' snapped Sunny with rare irritation. 'It doesn't matter anyway. Kyle has you now. And there are more important things happening. My kind are being hurt... and killed.' A widening fear was flourishing in the Soul. 'Your people are going to destroy the cryotanks and the Souls inside to punish us for what we've done.' A profound mental sigh came from Sunny as she tried to get a handle on her emotions. 'Then we will respond, and more Humans will die. Please, Jodi, put aside your anger and try to stop this.'

That grated on Jodi because she knew Sunny was right. Granted she felt very justified in her anger, but she was also being childish and petty. There would be time later to sort out their feelings with Kyle...hopefully. As what to do about the rebels' apparent attempt to seize the cryotanks? Jodi was not sure how she felt.

They were moving at a crawl, waylaid by both traffic and the frightened mob. It was readily apparent there was lots of confusion and fear. No seemed to know exactly where to go, their only driving thought was to keep clear of the buildings. Through her tinted specs, Jodi saw more injured Souls with blood and bullet wounds, more evidence of the violence from inside the airport. A woman clutched two young children close as she tried to run. A gray-haired man with blood covering his white shirt stumbled along. Jodi's stomach twisted with regret and disgust.

A man in a uniform approached them. He was not a Seeker, but he appeared to be some form of airport security. He rapidly tapped on the driver side window. Even as Jared rolled it down the man was speaking, fast and stressed. "You can't stay here! There is great danger...Humans are
attacking anyone inside the airport!"

"We here to picking up a friend..." Jared tried to explain, but the man was already moving on to the next car in line. Urgently trying to pass his warning.

They managed to crawl forward, but at an ever slowing pace. Too many people were jamming up the lane. Jared suddenly veered sharply, taking them off the road and heading into a short-term parking lot. It was already crowded back with both cars and people, but he was not bothering to finding a place between two painted lines. He took the first clear spot he could find, wedging the Jeep at an angle at the corner of the lot. Half on the pavement and half on the grass.

"This is going to have to do," said Jared as he turned the engine off. "We'll have to cover the rest of the way on foot."

Kyle was studying the nearby entrance to one of the terminals. "I think I see people inside. Can't tell if they're armed or not. But it's a safe bet they are."

Turning in his seat, Jared pushed his sunglasses down his nose so he could get an unrestricted view of the glass-enclosed entryway. "Yeah, looks like," he agreed. Glancing to Jodi, he asked, "Do you know any of them? Would they let you approach?"

Jodi was also examining the nearest entrance and shook her head. Indistinct shapes moved within the airport terminal. "I'm not sure," she said, "and given what happened when they learned Sunny was talking to me I don't think they'll be very friendly."

Jared was silent in thought. His eyes wondering over the vastness of the complex. "LAX is huge. There's no way they can cover everything. We just need to find a way in."

"And then what?" asked Jodi. "What's the plan?"

Seeing the unfolding chaos, she wondered if there was any way to stop it. Sunny was also anxiously fretting. Things were fast spiraling out of control and neither one of them saw an easy way to end the bloodshed. She heard Jared let out a pensive sigh, "Find Mel. Rescue Mel. Then get the hell out of here." As if reading their dual minds he added, "I don't know how to stop this. It's bigger than us. If we can get Mel and regroup back at the caves, maybe we can figure out our next step."

'But the cryotanks...' moaned Sunny as she heard Jared's pronouncement. She pictured hundreds of the silver cylinders ripped open and her people's fragile bodies throw to the ground to shrivel in the hot sun. Despair flooded from the Soul and washed into Jodi's mind.

'I'm sorry, Sunny,' Jodi whispered in response to the little Soul's grief. In her own mind, she pictured Carol, Jake, Jeremy, Samantha and everyone else she had gotten to know at the hospital. They were not evil people. But they were scared and angry. And people like Director Smith and Craig Williams seemed all too eager to bend her friends' pain to their advantage.

"Jodi? Are you okay?"

Kyle's concerned words pulled Jodi out of her shared internal sorrow with Sunny. He reached out and touched her face and it was only then she felt the dampness on her cheeks.

"Baby, talk to me," pleaded Kyle.

"It's Sunny, she's thinking about the Souls being pulled out of the cryotanks and left to die," she muttered as she wiped away the tears with the back of her hand. A little frown of confusion
perched on his pale brow. "It's like our emotions are tangled together or something," she tried to explain. "I feel what she feels."

Kyle appealed to Jared, "Can't we try to rescue some of the cryotanks?"

Jared's expression remained impassive. He again searched the nearby entryway into the airport. Carefully assessing possible routes into the building. "It's going to depend if you can talk them down, Jodi," he said as he turned back to her, his expression grim. "While we were held captive they kept our contact with the others really limited. Most of them don't know us and those that do think we're in league with the Seekers."

"Please, Jodi," begged Sunny. "Please help us..."

"Alright! Alright!" she snapped, a little louder than she meant to from the surprised looks on the both men's faces. "I can't make any promises," she told both Jared and Kyle and the Soul within her, "But I will try."

###

As absurd as it sounded, there were times Melanie wished Wanda was still in her head and running the show. Melanie had been the impulsive one, stronger willed. Wanda had been the voice of reason and wisdom. Together they had made a pretty good team. They had escaped the Seeker, struggled in the desert, and managed to survive in the caves until people had begun to accept the idea Wanda was not going to hand them over to the Seekers.

Given her current situation, having her ‘Soul Sister’ in her head would have certainly been helpful. Melanie was completely out of her depth. She sat in one of flight controller chairs in the LAX's traffic control tower, trying to make sense out of what she had seen and what she was now watching.

The top of the tower was laid out as an octagonal room, with large windows giving an unobstructed view of the surrounding airport and runways. An excellent view of the spreading chaos Craig Williams had unleashed on the Souls. Out on the tarmac fires were blazing. Something had made a massive explosion not long ago. The fire had spread to a nearby sky bridge and shuttle. Both continued to burn even as crews of firefighters wrestled to get it under control. Oily, smoldering clouds drifted upward and cast a hazy shroud over the airport. Inside the control room, banks of computer monitors displayed data on hundreds of shuttle flights for a good portion of the western part of the country. Melanie could hear increasingly urgent radio messages from flights inbound to the airport. Requesting updates on flight patterns and what runway they should use. Calls that were not going to be answered.

But she paid little attention to these distractions. Her focus was almost entirely on the middle-aged man laying on the floor. He had been, up until about a half an hour ago, a Soul working as a traffic controller. Williams had needed the control room intact and not wanted to risk the use of guns or explosives. His team had used gas grenades loaded with CURE to knock out the Souls in the room. The others in the tower had been taken away, but Craig had ordered this man to be left behind. He wanted Melanie to watch.

"Uhhhh," mumbled the man, his voice soft and dream like. Melanie could see his eyes shifting rapidly under his eyelids.

Williams was sitting a nearby chair. "Don't ask me how it all works," he said without looking at
"her. His eyes were also focused on the still sleeping figure. "You'd need one of our Docs to explain it. Sufficient to say when it does work, the Human is up and going in about an hour."

"And when it doesn't?" inquired Melanie tightly.

"Mostly its lights on, but nobody is home," said Williams mildly. "I might not be a scientist, but even I can understand you can't return a Human mind to a body that never really had one."

He gestured in the air as if he was calculating some long math problem. "There's a whole slew of variables involved if we can bring someone back. Their age, length of time they've been under control, genetic factors, stuff like that. Our success rate has been around seventy percent."

Her next question came out completely flat and devoid of emotion. "They created this CURE stuff, didn't they?" She already had a pretty good idea of the answer.

"Yes," replied Williams directly.

Neither one of them had to say who they were talking about - The Vultures. An alien race who had come long ago to the Souls' home world. Wanda had rarely thought about them, her peoples' past interaction with them far too disturbing for the Soul. But Melanie had recognized the dying creature in the laboratory almost immediately from Wanda's memories. Quite the shock for her.

And then Williams had unleashed one revelation after another on her. It left her feeling dizzy. Well, that, and the fact the bastard had hit her when she struggled in her restraints.

Turning her gaze from the unconscious man, she peered intently at Craig Williams. He had a closed off expression on his face. Guarded and precise. The look was not unlike Uncle Jeb's poker face, but there was something underneath his calm exterior that made her shiver.

She had tried fighting him, physical and verbally, to no avail. Letting out a controlled sigh she considered what to do. She might not have Wanda with her, but she could imagine what her sister would do if she were here. Wanda would seek peace, it was her nature. She could talk and get Williams to stand down...Maybe. Melanie had to admit there might not be any combination of words that could stop Craig Williams. The man was iron-willed. He had made it very clear she was not getting away from him. She had a metal shackle connecting her leg to one the control room's desks. Yet he did appear to need her. It was evident he was trying to convince her of his cause and that was something she could work with.

"You know," she said quietly, doing her best to draw in her still simmering anger with the man, "when I was first running with my brother I kept hoping and praying to see the army come rolling in to fight the Souls. You'd think with all those tanks, guns, and missiles we'd be a lot harder to take down. But it never happened."

"Most of the military was already compromised by the time the general population figured out what was going on," said Williams with a grunt. "Hell, most of the Seekers' hosts are from the army or police."

"Was that what happened to you? Was the Soul in you a Seeker?"

He eyed her silently, his face darkening ever so slightly. This would be like walking through a minefield, thought Melanie. If she misstepped she could send Williams into a rage, as he had been in Chicago – strangling Wanda as he snarled about slaughtering all the Souls. But if she could get him to start trusting her, find out more about his plans, maybe she could stop him.

"No," said Williams after a long pause. "Pale Light Gleaming was just a first wave settler. He was
far too mild-mannered to be a fighter. He just used me to help take apart all our weapons. Made sure the only ones with those tanks, guns, and missiles were the Seekers."

Melanie reflected on his account and what she knew about the Souls. "Most of the Souls can't fight. Is that the plan? Take out the Seekers and force the rest to leave the planet?"

"My plan? Or the Vultures?" asked Williams with a knowing smile. "Take a guess at what they want."

"Revenge," answered Melanie with a shudder.

Still smiling, he nodded. "The first conversation I had with one of the Vultures was short and sweet. 'Kill the Souls. Kill all of the Souls,' he said. They want to destroy every parasite in existence."

"And you don't?" scoffed Melanie. "You honestly don't want revenge as well?" Frustrated, she shook her head angrily. "I don't get it, Craig...The Vultures swoop in with this CURE, give us the means to take back the planet, and you turn around and kill one."

"You do not see the big picture, Melanie! You still don't get the reality of the situation. You've got to think, not be a child..." He bit back his irritation and went on in a calmer voice. "I know I threw a lot at you all at once. Vultures are here. They've been here a long time. They've been influencing us. People's ability to resist the Souls isn't random chance."

"How do you know all this?" she challenged. "Did the Vultures tell you? If they've been planning all this for so long, why did they let the Souls win in the first place?"

Williams leaned forward in his seat, his voice intense. "Now you're asking the right questions! And the answer is – No, the Vultures lied. They've been lying to us since the beginning. They were hidden right under our noses. The big deep, dark secret of the Facility. But the others..." he trailed off with a sad shake of his head. "You see Melanie, most of the Facility is made up of a bunch of egg head scientists. Real smart, but the kind who can't see the forest for the trees types. And they talked themselves in circles until they talked themselves right past the reality of what the Vultures are."

Stretching his arms wide in an act of self-laudation "But I saw the truth from the moment they revealed themselves. They way they looked, the names they had - Pazuzu, Asag, Lilu. All names of demons. Names we gave to them long ago.

See, they waited till we were good and desperate. When we had no choice but to take their hand and their magic CURE." His smile came back. The one that made her very uneasy. "Hard to say no to the devil when he comes calling."

It was working, he was beginning to open up and share. Williams was still cagey about his overall plans, but she was learning. But before she could ask more questions, a startled gasp came from the unconscious man laying on the floor.

Taking both Melanie and Williams by surprise, they turned to see he was now awake. His hazel eyes, now without a trace of silver in them, were open. He stared at them in stunned silence.

Swallowing hard, his jaw began to work slowly.

"Umm, what? Where...am...I?" said the unknown man.

"Welcome," replied Williams gamely. "Do you remember your name?" To Melanie, he stated in a lowered voice, "It always helps when they can remember their own name."
Melanie knew this to be true. The former Healer Candy had been like this after the Soul Summer Song had been removed. Confused and disorientated. It had taken her over a day to wake up and many more days to recall her original name. She wondered when using CURE just how long it would take.

"I'm...Umm...I'm Raindrop..." and then his eyes became impossibly huge in horror. "NO!" he shouted. "My name is Dan!" Then his eyes started darting all over the room, wildly panicked. "My wife was acting strange...I came home and she..."

Dan trailed off as his frantic inspection of the control room finally rested on Craig Williams and his silver-ringed eyes. "Oh God! Get away from me!" he shouted as he pressed into the floor, terribly frightened. To Melanie, it looked like he was trying to force himself into the floor to get away from the other man.

"It's okay, you're safe," assured Melanie as she tried to calm him down.

"W-Who are you?" asked Dan, still panicked and more than a little confused.

Williams let out a tired sigh at the man's fright. He made a vague gesture to his eyes and their alien appearance. "Always the same thing for me. We'll need to get one of the others to help our new friend Dan." He grabbed his radio from a nearby workstation. "Madison, come in. We'll need to get Marge or Carol up here. We've got another recovery."

A long stretch of silence came from the radio. Williams scowled. He was pressing on the radio's send button when it let out a squawk. "Sir," came Madison's voice, stressed high with urgency, "There's a situation at the hangars."

####

"Shoot it! Shoot it!" yelled Connie as she dove to the floor.

Above her, two of the Spider's long arms narrowly missed her. She rolled to the side, hoping to escape the alien, but the multi-limbed creature pivoted nimbly on its legs and pounced. Covering the distance to Connie in a little more than a blink of an eye, four of its arms pinned her to the floor of the hangar. She let out a cry of pain as the Spider held her down.

Everything had been going so well ruminated Noah grimly as he and the others faced off against the alien Spider. Work on the spaceship had begun without a problem. They had just gained access to the ship's computer core when the Spider had attacked. The alien must have been hiding in one of the other ships. Maybe it had been observing the Humans or been busy with repair work and had not noticed their initial intrusion. But whatever it had originally been doing, the Spider was swiftly and efficiently taking apart his team. Tyler already lay unmoving on the ground from where the alien had jumped him.

Jake and Elliot took aim and fired, but their bullets were ineffectual against the thick scales of the creature. It leaped again, off Connie, and struck out with three of its arms at the two men. Elliot was quickly knocked over from the first two. But Jake was fast enough to scuttle out of the way from the last arm. In rapid succession, he fired away at the Spider. Two bullets struck one of its many eyes, and the creature wheeled back.

Diego along with Mandy and Liang managed to close the distance to the agile Spider and now fired off their own guns. Mandy managed to land a hit on one of the legs and the alien stumbled. But it
was quick to recover. Even with damaged eye and limb, it was still very dangerous.

This was not going to work, realized Noah. The alien had too many arms and eyes. And Spiders did not process pain in the same way a Human did. It could continue to function even with multiple injuries. And the thick hide could protect it from most of their weapons. Yet it did have weaknesses.

Noah focused on the parasite still stuck in his head. It had been a Spider in another world before it stole his life. Memories of a gray, cold world filled his mind. The Soul's name on that world had been Evaluator of Samples. A name that simply reflected its function, for the Spiders had no concept of imagination or abstract thought.

Through the bizarre tapestry of memory, Noah focused on the creatures' anatomy. As advanced as their minds were, the Spiders' bodies were actually very simple. Uncomplicated organs maintained an organic structure which was entirely dedicated to the three brains. Each one was well protected behind the dense carapace of the Spider's body. The three minds were tied together by a thick neural cord. A concentrated mass of neurons allowing the separate parts to work together as one. And there in the Soul's memories, Noah found the Spiders' Achilles Heal.

"Shoot at the segment between the legs! Just above the eyes!" he cried out.

"What!?" yelled back Jake. One of the Spider's arms latched on to him and it swiftly dragged the man down.

He did not have time to explain. Noah ran forward, firing his gun. Up until today, he had never actually used one. It felt so heavy in his hand, and it's recoiled surprised him. His two shots went wide, missing the alien completely.

"Ahhh!" cried Jake as the Spider latched a second arm on to him.

Noah gritted his teeth and took aim again. He fired two more times. The first shot did nothing, but the second landed on the seam between one leg joint and the next. Just right of the damaged eye. The whole body of the Spider suddenly shuddered. Taking a steadying breath, Noah fired three more times. Each shot struck the vulnerable spot between the sections of scaly armor on the Spider, tearing into the neural cord.

Half the Spider's limbs stuttered and flailed about. It began to retreat, but its motion was far less coordinated. It stumbled and swayed as it tried to get away.

"What the hell did you do?" asked Jake as he struggled to his feet.

Panting, Noah managed to wheeze out, "Hit it in it's...vulnerable spot. The spot between the legs...and to the right of their eyes, the armor is weak."

Jake frowned. "How?" he began and then stopped. He shook his head, amazed. "You pulled how to do that from your worm?"

"Yeah," breathed out Noah as he felt his racing heart start to slow down. The Spider was trying to crawl back toward one of the spaceships. He watched as Mandy, Elliot, Liang and Diego advanced on the wounded alien, none of them having any intention of letting it get away.

Jake's eyes narrowed with apprehension. "What was that Spider thing doing here?"

"I think it was one these ship's pilots," guessed Noah
The other man shook his head again, a mix of anger and disbelief finally settling on his face. "Com'on," said Jake as both he and Noah looked to where Connie and Tyler lay on the ground. They had taken only a few steps towards the two when Connie let out a moan of pain. Haltingly she was trying to right herself.

"Easy there, little lady," spoke Jake gently as he went to one knee to help up the diminutive woman. To Noah, he said, "Go check on Tyler."

Noah nodded and crossed over to where the teenager lay face down. Reaching down, he was going to try to see how badly Tyler was hurt when he saw the bent angle of the boy's head, it was twisted unnaturally and there was a slowly widening pool of dark red blood forming under the his head. Tyler was dead. Noah was not sure the Spider had purposefully killed the boy or not. He found he did not care.

A strong shudder of despair ran through Noah as he straightened up. He saw Connie was leaning on Jake as the two approached. They too saw Tyler was gone. Jake said nothing, but his face darkened in a cold rage while Connie let out a muffled sob. But her cries were drowned out by the staccato sound of multiple guns firing at the same time. The others were busy finishing off the Spider. Tyler would be avenged.

Even as the gunshots trailed off, a shout drew Noah's attention. Spinning around he spotted three figures in black running through the hangar's open bay doors. Joe, Madison, and Tom sprinted towards them, their weapons were drawn, worry heavy on their expressions.

"Have they gotten in? Who were you shooting at?" demanded Madison as she drew to a stop.

"Gotten in? What?" said Jake puzzled. He began to explain, "There was a Spider here. We think it was one of the pilots. We took care..."

"No," interrupted Joe. "Haven't you seen? A bunch of worms are massing at the airfield and heading this way. We've tried to disperse them, but they keep coming. They must have figured out what we're doing. We just barely managed to outmaneuver them and get here first."

"We've been a little busy," replied Noah hotly. "How many parasites are coming?"

Tom pointed out towards the area outside the hangar. The spaceships being loaded with cryotanks still sat deserted on the runway. But beyond the giant ships Noah could see a growing crowd steadily approaching.

"Yeah," added Tom nonchalantly, doing his best to cover his worries, "only a couple hundred buggers coming right at us."

###

The sound of their feet treading lightly on the tiled floor of LAX's Terminal 3 was the only noise to be heard as Jodi, Kyle, and Jared guardedly made their way deeper into the empty airport. There was no one in sight, but everywhere there were signs of people leaving very abruptly. Bags and suitcases were strewn about, laying where they had been abandoned. A nearby coffee shop, a little bistro with a semi-circle of tables and chairs nestled in-between the other stores along the walkway, had steam still coming off cups and plates of half-eaten food.

The smell warm bread reached Jodi's nose, and her stomach rumbled unhappily. She was starving and had no idea the last time she had eaten solid food. It would have been easy to step out of the
shadows and retrieve some of the discarded meal. Unfortunately going out in the open would have made them visible to the many security cameras around the airport. It would make them a quick and easy target for the Facility's forces.

Jared seemed to have an almost inhuman ability to find a route keeping them in the shadows and out of the direct view of the cameras in the Terminal. Kyle was nearly as good, he had helped her maneuver in precise movements designed for stealth and concealment. They had moved in a zig-zag path, hiding behind half-walls, shrouding themselves in the dark spaces. It honestly surprised Jodi. Kyle had never been one for subtlety or keeping himself hidden.

'He had to learn to how,' answered Sunny in her mind. 'Kyle stole what he needed from us to survive. We Souls are watchful so he had to adapt. So did Jared and all the other Humans.'

What it must have been like for Kyle to endure all those years while on the run from the Souls. The whole world turned against him and the other surviving humans. Jodi had seen it in his eyes. A stern hardness that had never been there before. She wondered how Kyle had kept going for all those years.

'You, Jodi,' whispered Sunny. The thought of saving you kept him going.'

Then she was gone, pulling herself into the back of Jodi's consciousness. Everything happening at the airport terrible frightened the Soul within her. Sunny was doing her best to rein herself in and keep her fear from leaking into Jodi. Trying in any way she could to help. It was odd, Jodi realized she felt a bit lonely when Sunny was not there in her thoughts.

A little snort of amusement made it's way out of her. Of all the insanity going on, the fact she was somehow becoming friends with the alien who had stolen her body was completely ridiculous.

Kyle heard her short giggle and turn a questioning look her way.

Keeping her voice low, she said by way of explanation, "It's nothing, just me and Sunny talking."

A smile crept his way onto his face. "Just like Wanda and Melanie, but in reverse."

"Wanda was in Melanie for what? A whole year?" Jodi let out a breath. "I don't know how they did it. We've only been like this for less than a week, and I think I'm going crazy."

"Well, you are hearing voices in your head," teased Kyle.

Jodi shook her head in frustrated amusement. "Lughead, that is such a lame joke."

Kyle's smile broadened into a grin. "Ah, come on, Jodes, bad jokes are what I'm good at."

She wanted to kiss him. With Sunny, Kyle had been protective, holding her, comforting her, but they had not gone further. A certain reluctance had held both of them back. Namely...her. But she was back now. Her timing could have been better, but in this world who knew how much time you had. As if her body was moving on its own, she leaned in towards him and Kyle mirrored her movement.

They both heard it at the same time and froze. Voices. Urgent and worried voices, but the words still softly spoken:

"I can't get a signal...maybe we should try a regular phone."

"We tried already, the line was dead. But someone by now must have contacted the authorities."
"I know I saw those people with weapons at the entrance. They must be Humans. The Seekers are going to have a tough time."

"Perhaps we should hide here, wait for help to come. It could be dangerous outside."

There were five of them. Two men and three women. They huddled close together as they walked the Terminal. Two of the women were older, with graying hair. The other woman was younger, with a dark complexion and wiry hair. Her arm was around one of the men, holding him close for support. He was taller, with his hair cut down to just a blond fuzz on his head. As they came closer, Jodi could tell the other man was really just a boy, his lanky body awkwardly moving into his teenage years.

Five Souls, who had somehow managed to escape the rampaging Humans. They were coming from the opposite direction. Their steps careful and cautious as they traveled down the broad and empty concourse. But not that careful. Souls were not used to hiding or stealth. In their world, there was no need.

"Ah, damn it," sighed Jared in a resigned tone. "They're not paying attention to the security cameras. They're going to be spotted."

"We could warn them off," suggested Kyle.

Jared's face twisted into a frown. "Might be too late. The Facility must have their hands full keeping this place locked down. Make sense for them to use the airport's security system. They may know these five are already here."

They were close now. If Jodi stepped out of the shadows, the Souls would easily see her. What would they do when they saw her eyes lacked a shimmer of silver? Could she warn them? Would they listen to her, or see her as the enemy?

But Jared had been right. It was already too late. The sound of feet slapping hard against the tile floor echoed from further down the terminal. Shouts came as well, angry shouts. The five Souls stiffened in alarm, fear blooming on their faces.

"Stop right there!" bellowed a voice from down the wide corridor.

Jodi stepped out of their shadowed hiding spot. Sunny was not trying to urge her on. No, this was Jodi's decision. The Soul was frozen by fear in the back of Jodi's mind. Terrified by the likely outcome of these five Souls soon-to-be encounter with armed Humans. And Jodi was just as afraid too, but for a different reason.

Three figures in black were running right at her with their weapons out. The man in the middle, leading this small squad, had sun-drenched skin and an all too familiar face. His eyes widen into utter astonishment as he ran up.

"Jodi?"

"Hi, Jeremy," said Jodi. She was surprised it came out far calmer than she thought possible.

Standing stiff and silent Jeremy Waller gaped at her. In fact, an odd hush had gone through surrounding space. Jodi was aware Kyle and Jarred had come out of their hiding spot as well, in an attempt to pull her back. The stood warily watching Jeremy. Behind her, the Souls were too terrified and confused by her sudden appearance to do anything. And the two men with Jeremy flanked him on either side, held blank, angry expressions as they took in everyone.
"Jodi?" began Jeremy after long seconds had passed. "What? How?" He appeared to be trying to believe what was seeing.

"Who is this woman?" asked one of Jeremy's companions. He was stocky and broad-shouldered.

The other man with Jeremy swept his gaze over Jared and Kyle. He was taller and leaner, with a pockmarked face. All three men gave a little start of recognition. Apparently, they had met before. "It's them," he said, "...the traitors."

Kyle snorted loudly. "Ah, not this crap again! How many times do we have to tell you, we don't work for the Seekers!"

One or more of the Souls behind Jodi must have moved. The action caused Jeremy and his team to refocus on the aliens with a swift and fierce response. Jeremy quickly side stepped her and brought his gun up, a large pistol. The other two did the same. "On the ground! Now!" barked Jeremy to the five Souls. "I will not give you a second warning!"

"Jeremy, please," whispered Jodi. "You don't need to do this."

He gave her a sidelong glance. "I kinda think I do."

Meekly the three women, the man, and the boy sat down on the floor. Their heads were bowed in despair, all of them were shaking in terror.

"You just going to shoot them?" asked Jared, his voice even and measured.

The taller man gave Jared a quick glance of contempt and then returned his gaze to the Souls. "Shoot them? No, not if we don't have to." He appraised the five Souls quietly for a moment. Judging them. "We would have just kicked them out of here, but some of the buggers outside have got it in their head to resist. So, for now, we'll hold on to them."

"Yeah," said the shorter man. "They're starting to realize the Seekers aren't coming to rescue them."

From the floor, one of the older women managed to sputter out, "T-They're n-not?"

The stout man leaned down to the gray-haired Soul and his face broke into a terrible grin. "Trust me, I used to be one."

His admission of his former identity caused a spasm of fear to run through the Souls. "They know...they know how to remove us..." whimpered the teen.

"Keith, I don't need them all stirred up and killing themselves," broke in Jeremy sternly, admonishing the other man. He looked down at the Souls, his face twisting with disgust. He did not seem to want to speak the following words but managed to get them out. "If you behave yourselves and don't fight us, we'll put you in cryotanks. No one will harm you."

With Jeremy's promise of their safety the Souls just stared up at him, slack-jawed in disbelief. Jodi was stunned as well. She had not expected Jeremy's offer. Was it just a lie? Meant to lull the parasitic aliens into not shredding their hosts' brains. Making it easier for their removal and disposal.

Jeremy turned away from the Souls. Apparently unconcerned if they believe him or not. His unhappy expression vanished when he moved closer to her. Again he stood staring at her. "How are you here?" he asked in a near whisper of a voice. "Director Smith said you were dead."
Jodi looked to Kyle and Jared, then to the Souls sitting cowering on the floor, and then finally back
Jeremy. She took a deep breath and began, "Jeremy, you need to listen to me. All of you need to
listen to me. Smith has been lying to you. Lying to all of us."

###

She was still lost.

With every bit of will she had, she fought her way out of the darkness. She had no idea how long
she had been going. Every bit of her ached and she was so tired. But she had to go on.

"Wanda," came a voice from very far away. She felt herself freeze in place. "Please, Wanda,"
continued the faint words, "come back to us. Honey, we need you..."

'Wanda,' that was right. Her name was Wanda and voice was...Ian's! She remembered now. She
began to run, fighting her way back to awareness.

"Mmm..." she heard someone faintly moan. She realized it was her own voice and she pressed on.

Little bits and pieces of sensation came back to her. She was laying down, a soft mattress was
under her body. Her right hand felt warm, someone was holding it. More sounds came, a chorus of
voices...angry voices.

"Grab him!"

"Let go!

"Please stop..."

With a rushing roar, the world came back, and Wanda's eyes flickered open. She stared up at the
ceiling. More noises came, the sound of wood being hacked and splintered. Distant shouts. Her
hand hurt and she tried to pull it away from the pain, but she could not budge it. With an effort, she
turned her head to see what was causing the discomfort.

On the right side of the bed, Ian was standing with her hand in his, but he was facing away from
her. His attention was entirely focused on the closed door to the room. He was squeezing her hand
too tightly. She again gave a weak tug. Ian must have noticed her efforts for he whirled around in a
blur to face her.

"WANDA!" cried Ian, falling to his knees by the side of the bed.

"Ian," she managed to croak out, "I was so lost...but I heard you...

Before she could say more, he was scooping her up in his strong arms. Encircling her and holding
her close. She tried again to speak, ask what was happening, but his mouth found hers. His kiss
stole her breath and spread a warmth through her body.

From outside Ian's warm embrace, she heard Simon let out an irritated growl, "Oh for God's sake,
stop molesting her, O'Shea."

Ian released her and to Wanda's humiliation, she flopped back onto the bed like a limp doll. She
seemed to have no strength at all. Sucking in a breath, she managed to whisper out, "W-What's g-
going on?"
"What's going on?" repeated Simon with a scowl. "Well, let's see." He counted away on his hand with a sarcastic glower. "First, you and that idiot Long Rivers thought it would be a good idea to dump you into Mia's neck. Second, in Mia's body, you took a trip down her memory lane. Third, you then screamed your head off about Vultures and went on to give Mia a grand mal seizure. Fourth, Long Rivers puts you back in your original body, or as original as anything your kind have stolen. And fifth, that was about twelve hours ago and now we have a squad of Seekers outside the door demanding to take Mia."

Wanda felt her body tremble as the events of last night came back to her. "Mia is..."

"In a coma," came Annie's sharp response. Rolling her head to the side, Wanda saw Simon's wife sitting beside the hotel room's second bed where Mia lay unmoving. "You nearly killed her."

What little strength she possessed drained away and Wanda sagged into the bed, despairing over the damaged she had done. She had never meant for this to happen. Not to cause more lives to be lost. Tears began to swell in her eyes.

"The weapons are nearly ready."

She stiffened, remembering the translated words of the Vultures.

There was more banging from the outside and loud shouts. Ian started speaking, his words coming out in a rush as he tried to talk over the outside noise. It was all too much, Wanda could not form the simplest of thoughts as she was assailed by the chaos of the outside world and the terrible knowledge gained from Mia's memories.

"Please, Ian," she begged. "Slow down...what's happening outside?"

Ian stopped and let out a shuddering exhale of frustration and anxiety. He must have been so worried about her. Beginning again, this time, slower, he explained how a group of Seekers had arrived earlier to collect Mia. Seeker Jade's host body had been safely stored and Jade herself waited in a cryotank to be inserted into the girl. Long Rivers and Nigel had tried their best to explain what had happened last night and repeatedly emphasized Mia was in no position to have another Soul placed into her. But the Seekers were adamant Mia be turned over to them. They wanted to see the memories for themselves. It would be regrettable if Mia were lost, but the information she had was too valuable. Their demands only served to enrage the Humans. They barricaded their home on the second floor the hotel to block the Seekers. The outside noise she was hearing were the Seekers steadily and methodically taking apart the Humans' hastily improvised barriers.

"I-I need to speak with the Seekers," said Wanda after she digested Ian's account.

Along with Annie, Simon was now checking on Mia, their backs to her as they performed an examination. But Simon's sarcastic wit had not gone anywhere. "Oh, you've got the magic words to make them leave us alone?"

"They don't need Mia," rasped Wanda. "I've seen them...I've seen it all..."

Ian's faced twisted with added worries. "Then the Vultures are really there at the Facility?"

She nodded. "It's so much worse than we thought. We've been so blind..."

A crunch and then another bang came from outside the room. Ian, Simon, and Annie had sealed themselves in here, the very last line of defense. Just before she had woken up, they had heard Scott and Jason being dragged away by the Seekers. Neither one was exactly sure what the
Seekers were doing to the other Humans, but it could not be good.

Even though she felt like she had just run a hundred miles and could barely lift her head, Wanda steeled herself. "I can stop them," she insisted, "let them in. I will make them listen."

Simon fixed her with a very long and very intense stare. "I can't make up my mind if you are very brave or very stupid." He held up a small blade, a surgical scalpel. "This was all I able to keep after the Seekers stormed in here the first time. All my medical interments confiscated. Too many worries I might turn my tools on your kind."

He reached out with his free hand, and Annie took hold with a fierce grip. They shared a silent look which held more than any amount of words could ever convey. Holding the scalpel just as tightly as he held his wife, Simon turned to face the door. The last flimsy barrier keeping the Seekers out. "I can get one or two of them before they get me," he said grimly as the door began to creak.

"No! Please!" implored Wanda. "You don't need to do that! I know Jade and the Seekers have been unfair to you..."

"Unfair!" snapped Annie. "Do you ever have a gift for understatement."

Still kneeling next to her, Wanda could feel Ian bristle. "Hey! Let Wanda try. We aren't going to get out of this mess any other way."

"A mess she put us in," shot back Simon.

Any more debate was abruptly cut off as the door to the outside was flung open and darkly dressed Seekers pushed into the room, weapons at the ready. Their focus went immediately to Simon and his small blade. Swiftly and surely they took aim at the Human they saw as a threat.

Annie let out a cry as the Seekers target Simon.

Wanda was never quite sure how she managed it, but she forced her small fatigued body out of the bed. The hotel room where they had barricaded was cramped and the space between her bed and the door only a short distance. She jumped the gap, her arms and legs an uncoordinated jumble as she desperately tried to stop the unfolding tragedy. The lead Seeker, his eyes centered on Simon, suddenly widened in surprise as she clumsily flung herself in between the doctor and incoming Seekers.

The gun barked. Something stung her, hot and hard. Ian screamed. And then she was falling to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

The biology of the spiders and their vulnerability is of course made up, but I've been wanting to put them into a fight for a while. Hopefully it comes off sounding believable. The whole Reckoning chapter is getting to be a little long. But I promise it will be wrapped up in my next installment. Till then...
"I hope my demonstration with our new friend Dan was enlightening," said Craig Williams as he took a seat next to Melanie.

Dan, the recently recovered man, had just left with some of Williams's people. He was still confused and jittery but did relax when he found Marge and Carol to be human. Melanie had heard the sympathy in the two women's voices. Letting him know they completely understood what he was going through. They still eyed Melanie suspiciously, but they had plenty to do with the others in the control tower exposed to the alerting effect of the Vultures' CURE gas had not stayed long.

She studied Williams, he appeared to be completely unconcerned about the news of the Souls massing at the airport's hangars. Radiating a confidence his people could handle the aliens. And what were these rebels doing out at those hangars? From her vantage point in the control tower, Melanie could see nearly a dozen sleek white vessels grouped at one end of the runway. All waiting to load or unload their cargo of cryotanks and leave the planet. That had to be it.

Choosing to ignore his question about watching the medicine at work, she posed her theory about the cryotanks to Williams. He rewarded her guess with that smile she hated. "Well, I want them. The Facility has other...priorities."

Her patience with his games was slipping. Frustrated she shot back, "Come on! What are you doing here!? And why do you need me!?"

Unperturbed at her outburst, Williams answered. "I need you to be my olive branch to the Souls here in LA."

His response floored her. It was not what she was expecting. "You've got to be kidding! You want me to be what...your...peace ambassador?"

Amused, he shook his head. "Not quite." Reining in his levity, his tone grew serious. "I've given it a lot of thought, Melanie. No matter how you shape it, even if we have tons of CURE available, there will always be some people we can't bring back. They'll be nothing but empty shells." His voice wavered a bit. "Most of them will be...kids. Bodies too young to have been anything other than a Host. It's a bitter pill to swallow, accepting that reality. But the alternative? Taking the worms out and just letting them wither away and die? I figure we let some of them stay, but with the understanding we're the ones in charge. It will take work on my part to convince the others, but they'll come around." Pointing his finger at her, he added, "And then you come in, my dear, to help with the Souls. You've had one in your head and know how they think. You can talk to them, get them to listen."

Scowling, she replied, "You've got plenty of people who were Souls, they all know how they think. You don't need me."

"Yes I do." insisted Williams. "What I have is a bunch of wound up, angry, frustrated people, who are ready to lash out at anything they perceive as a threat. That's what I wanted you to see with our boy Dan. Waking up to world everything he knew is gone. The knowledge he's been nothing but a puppet for an alien parasite for years. Dan's afraid right now, but it doesn't take long for fear to turn to rage."

He paused and look of disgust clouded his features. "The Facility Docs can talk all they want about hypothalamus activity, serotonin degeneration, and elevated cortisol levels. But I know the truth,
its good old fashion trauma. Something I saw all too often to soldiers in combat. Physiological scars, it can change you forever."

"What I did was to give these people purpose and order. Helped organize them into something that can focus their anger," added Williams with a touch of pride. "But trust me, none of them are in the mood to do much talking."

Melanie sat silent, thinking about what he said about the recovered people. She had little to compare against. Beside herself, only Lacy and Candy had been successfully recovered from being a Host. Of which, she and Lacy had been the unusual ones, still conscious after insertion. Candy had been someone completely erased by her Soul. The ex-healer rarely spoke about her time as Summer Song. While she was not someone who was bubbling over with rage, it was not hard to image Candy had gone through a very traumatic event. Was the outcome different because the Vultures' CURE had been used?

Eventually, she gave up trying to figure it out and said, "I guess that's what they want. The Vultures I mean. They want humanity like this, enraged at the Souls."

"It is what they want," confirmed Williams. "An army to fight the Souls. And I'll admit I need them as well. But in time I hope to help them become something more than just a...weapon."

There was an earnest in his voice and expression that made Melanie doubt he was lying to her. In his own twisted way, Williams was trying to make things better. Feeling a throbbing headache coming on from hearing his plans, she let out a long sigh that came out more like a groan.

"So that's it?" she asked. "You want to fight the Souls and establish some sort of dominion over them? That's your solution? You dismiss Wanda and what she was trying to do, but she was trying to bring peace for all of us."

Williams shook his head, disappointed. "You keep throwing Wanda at me like she's some sort of fix-all miracle worker. You saw that newspaper article. The Souls don't lie or embellish, the story was the truth. Marc and his people are being forced to help track down the Facility. Humans hunting humans. That's your Wanda's peace."

Melanie was quick to defend her sister. "Wanda didn't want that. She wanted us to coexist, not fight each other."

"Don't be so naive, Melanie. Wanda's plans will always end up at the same place – the subjugation of mankind. Because at a fundamental level the Souls, Wanda included, want harmony above all else."

"Is that really such a bad thing?"

Jumping out of his chair, Williams strode over to tower over Melanie. "Their harmony will always come at our expense. All for the greater good, except what the Souls really mean is what's best for themselves." Pointing out to the field of spaceships, his voice went flat with contempt, "Do you know how many Souls are coming here? More and more all the time. Every day there is roughly three hundred thousand births on this planet. All of those poor infants quickly turned to hosts. Day after day. Is your Wanda going to make all that stop? Make her people give our bodies back?"

"She doesn't have to," shot back Melanie. "Some Souls are already having children and not putting them up for insertion. I've seen it myself. They'll raise them as Human."

"Do you even hear yourself?" asked Williams with a disgusted role of his eyes. "Some Souls are
having Human babies? Then that means other Souls won't. It will be their decision whether or not to insert their host's offspring with another of their own kind. I guess the human in question doesn't get a say in the matter. Just like it is now. And that certainly doesn't do anything for the thousand of Souls stockpiling in cryotanks waiting for their own bodies or the billions of remaining hosts."

"We have to start somewhere," defended Melanie weakly. "You can't just force peace to happen."

Williams laughed in her face. A harsh and vicious snort of amusement. "Force peace? That's exactly what the Souls do. They forced it upon us. They didn't ask, they didn't bother to get our opinion or approval. We were just something for them to use. And until we stop that, nothing, and I mean nothing, will change."

"We have you surrounded! You can't escape!" came the chorus of voices from the slowly advancing crowd. They formed a wide oval, encompassing the entire tarmac in the view from the front of the hangar. "Please!" they besieged, "There is no need for more violence!"

Hiding behind a row of empty crates which severed as their hastily created rampart, Tom let out a growl. Holding his handgun in a two-handed grip, he jumped up and took steady aim at the encroaching horde. Squeezing off three shots, he watched as two Souls fell.

"Wanna bet!?" yelled Tom.

Those near the wounded were quick to put themselves in front as a shield. Protecting while others attended to the injuries. The mob's overall advance slowed but did not stop.

Tom was again taking aim when Joe put a restraining hand on his shoulder and pulled the other man back down behind their cover. "No," he ordered, "don't waste the ammo."

"We've got to stop them," countered Tom heatedly. "Noah's team still needs time to finish their work."

Joe shook his head. "We're not doing it with bullets. They know we don't have an unlimited supply of ammo." He leaned up, getting a quick glance at the mod. By now the number of Souls surrounding them was well over two hundred and growing. From the uniforms worn by many in the crowd, it appeared most were flight crews or other airport workers. None of them were Seekers and they had no skill at fighting. Yet they made up for it in the sheer amount bearing down on the Humans.

Ducking back down Joe continued, "We can throw everything we've got at them and they'll still outnumber us a hundred to one."

Madison risked a look at the encroaching Souls and muttered with stewing anger, "Where the hell are Mitchel and his reinforcements?"

"Beating back his own group of buggers," answered Joe. He saw the growing tension filling Tom and Madison. "Look," he said soberly, "we knew the Souls wouldn't just roll over when we went on the attack. Individually or in small numbers they're weak, but put enough of them together they're a force to reckon with. We're going to have to find another way to break them."

While cautiously observing the Souls, Madison said, "Well I'm open to suggestions." Suddenly she pushed out of her crouch and fired off several shots. Lowering back down just as quickly she was
already countering Joe's admonishing glare. "Had a couple sneaking around the nearest spaceship, trying to outflank us."

Stymied, Joe exhaled roughly. "Alright, how many CURE gas grenades do we have left?"

Tom made quick inventory check of their supplies. "After storming the control tower and then taking out those Souls holed up in the parking garage we've only got three left."

Madison shook her head. "That's better than nothing, but we'd need twice as many to stop all of them. We won't be able to disperse the drug over enough of them before it begins to dissipate." She glanced out again, observing the swarm of Souls. "Why don't they rush us? They've got more than enough to survive anything we throw at them."

Joe leaned out past the cover and watched as well. The Souls were now creeping cautiously past the another spaceship. They were standing shoulder to shoulder, moving in a near lockstep fashion as they closed they distance. The space between the invading aliens and their crates was less than two hundred feet.

He noticed as the Souls pressed past a nearby vessel waiting on the tarmac, many broke their implacable march and quickly surrounded a group of crates. Just as swiftly they began to carry the boxes away. The crates were like the one's Joe, Madison, and Tom were hiding behind. And similar containers were waiting outside the loading bays of all the spaceships – each full of metallic cylinders.

"It's the cryotanks," said Joe with a surprised smile. "That's why they're so careful and why we can't get them to fall back. They're protecting them."

"I somehow doubt the parasites will just leave us alone when they get their little buddies out of here," argued Tom. "Besides," he said as he tapped one the crates, "these are empty."

Madison now had a growing smile as well, Joe could tell the gears in her head were beginning to shift. "True," she said, "But the buggers don't know that. That's why they won't directly attack us, they won't risk their precious cryotanks being harmed."

Her grin spread to Tom. "We can use that," he said.

"Damn right we can," answered Joe. He studied the nearest starship sitting outside the hanger. The multitude of marching Souls had almost reached it. Like the other ships, under its broad wing nestled a group of containers, waiting to be loaded. One of the crates was open, the silver reflective surface of the cryotanks gleaming in the overhead sun. Standing up, Joe commanded to Madison and Tom. "Each of you takes a CURE gas grenade and follow me."

They did so and Joe led them out past their meager cover. The Soul saw them and many shouted out, "You not be harmed if you put down your weapons!"

"Go to hell!" screamed Madison in reply.

Pointing to the nearby cryotanks, Joe ordered, "Hit them with everything we've got!"

All three began to shoot at the crates. Joe firing his shotgun while Madison and Tom using their smaller handguns. At their range to their target was easy. Shot after shot slammed into the protective storage of the cryotanks. Bullets impacted and the wooden crates began to splinter and crack. One shotgun shell burst apart a box and spilled the silver cylinders on the ground. Then ringing pings could be heard as the bullets began to strike the cryotanks directly.
If the weapons were actually doing damage to the cryotanks was impossible to tell, but the effect on the Souls was immediate. With a stricken cry, they broke ranks and surged forward. Running to cover the distance, desperate to protect their sleeping brethren from the vicious attacking Humans. They threw themselves in front and around the vulnerable crates. Forming a living wall of safety.

"Grenades out!" commanded Joe. Roughly the size of a baseball, the gas grenades were a nearly polished smooth coal-black orb. Inside a compressed form of the medical CURE surrounded a small explosive designed to spread their treatment over a wide area. A small round indentation on top was its trigger. Pushing down on the circle on top, Joe pulled his arm back. Madison and Tom did the same. Together they threw their bombs into the air above the mass of Souls crowding around the damaged crates.

The three grenades detonated with simultaneous THUD! The Souls looked up only to see a rapidly expanding black cloud. Not knowing what it was, some began to retreat. But not fast enough and many were engulfed by the murky fog. Thick tendrils of inky blackness settled over the entire mob. Soon nothing could be seen but for the billowing, foul smelling mist.

The remaining Souls on the tarmac had been rushing Joe and the others in an attempt to stop their attack. When his team released their gas grenades the aliens had paused, perturbed by the Humans' unknown weapon. Uncertain if they should help those enveloped by the strange black cloud or continue on with capturing the Humans. As the dark and hazy CURE began to slowly dissipate it became apparent everyone exposed to the dust lay unconscious. More than a hundred people lay scattered on the ground around the ruined crates.

Now only a handful of steps from Joe, Madison, and Tom the Souls still awake gaped at the fallen comrades. One Soul, tall with distinctive grey hair at his temples and dressed in a pilot's uniform turned to the Humans. "What did you do to them?" he demanded warily.

"We cured them," replied Joe.

"What? What did you cure them of?" asked another Soul.

Madison smugly explained, "Of being controlled...Of being you."

"That's not possible," said the pilot. "You are lying. They're just sleeping." A few Souls nodded in agreement. But others looked at their fallen comrades guardedly, uncertain what to believe.

While still clutching his shotgun, Joe marched towards the remaining Souls. When only a few feet remained between himself and the tall, distinguished man, Joe abruptly sprung forward and slammed the butt of his weapon into the other man's stomach. The Soul doubled over with a loud grunt of pain. Just as quickly Joe raised his arms and brought the end of the shotgun down into the hunched over man's head.

The crowd gasped as one at Joe's violence. They still outnumbered him, and he had only three shotgun shells left. But it did not matter, as the tall and now not so distinguished man crumpled to the ground, Joe dominated over the gathered Souls. "I don't care what you believe! You even so much as touch me, and my team will start tossing out the contents of captured cryotanks on the ground! We'll make quick work of it, all you need is a good pair of boots for stomping."

It was a lie, Noah and his people were busy with reprogramming the spaceship, but his deception was delivered flawlessly and Joe saw the fear of his threat on the Souls' faces. He paced in front of them, glowering menacingly. Tom and Madison picked up on his falsehood and made a show of relaying commands on the radio to nonexistent hidden rebels, advising them to be prepared to destroy captured cryotanks.
Yet Joe was just getting warmed up. "Two hundred and seventeen!" he shouted gleefully right in
their faces. "Just that little ridge on the underside of a Soul's body, bigger than the others. A gentle
little press of your finger is all it takes to remove you!"

With their most guarded secret of how to remove a Soul being shouted out by their enemy, a
staggered wail went through the gathered Souls. Joe continued unabated. With a wave of his
shotgun towards the unconscious people on the ground, he resumed his rant. "Everyone we
knocked out will wake up Human. They won't be your friends anymore! They won't want a thing to
do with you!"

"And what of us?" asked a Soul, "What has happened to the Souls inside them?"

"They're asleep," said Madison. She explained sternly as if she was talking to misbehaving
children. "No harm will come to them as long you behave yourselves. But threaten us, disobey us,
and we'll take them out and make them suffer."

"Monsters!" cried many of the Souls.

Tom threw their outrage right back at them. "No! You're the monsters! You're the ones you have
treated us like cattle! But no more!"

One of the Souls as she stepped forward with her hands raised, imploring for peace. She was a
middle-aged, heavy-set woman, dressed in a mechanics overalls. There was a desperate pleading in
her voice. "Please," she said, "Let us have the cryotanks. Let us have our kind." She looked
towards the slumped over bodies on the tarmac. "You can have yours. Let there be no more
hostilities."

Somewhere deep within in him, before he was taken over by Seeker Rush before he became a
resistance fighter, where he was just Officer Joseph Teller of the LAPD, heard her plea. But his old
life was overshadowed by his time as a Seeker. He remembered the time when Rush and other
Seekers had fought a group of Humans. Trying to flee, the desperate parents had used their only
gun to shoot one of the pursuing Seekers. Rush and the others had immediately returned fire. The
two adults were killed, but fortunately the young ones they had been protecting were recovered and
would make excellent hosts for newly arriving Souls. It was only one of many memories of his
body being used over and over to track down and capture people who's only crime was to be
human.

Joe shook his head slowly, almost sadly, and replied, "It's too late for that...Far too late."

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Laying face down on the carpeted floor Ian started to feel his arms going numb. In the beginning,
he had been thankful the Seekers had not knocked him out with their sleeping gas. Instead, they had
bound his arms behind his back and shackled his feet together. Putting him, along with Annie and
Simon, in a prone stance on the ground outside the hotel suite where they had made their last stand.
It had allowed him to hear Long Rivers as the Healer worked feverishly on Wanda. Now his
condition as some sort of hogtied animal was really beginning to annoy.

From the other room, he could still hear the Long Rivers talking. The Soul was as angry as Ian had
ever heard one of the usually gentle aliens. "In all my lives," thundered the Healer, "I have never
witnessed such a violent, reckless, and genuinely senseless action by a Soul!"
"The circumstances..." began a voice which Ian was certain belonged to a Seeker named Smoke Weaver.

Long Rivers did not let the Seeker continue. "I told you Wanderer and Mia were in this room. Both in an unconscious state. And yet you sent the Seekers in, guns blazing!"

Someone else spoke up. Their voice trembling, full of fear, adrenaline, and also a bit of reproachful defensiveness. "The Human had a knife."

"You mean this!?" snapped Long Rivers. There was a faint, repetitive metallic sound and Ian guessed Long Rivers was tapping the scalpel on a table. "Yes, truly this little blade was a dire threat to your body."

Simon, in a similar uncomfortable position beside Ian, grunted quietly, "I'm going to have to take back some stuff I said about that twit, Long Rivers. The guy has a spine after all."

Ian was about reply when yet another voice filter in from the other room. A very familiar one. "It is alright Long Rivers." She sounded frail and tired.

"Wanda!" yelled Ian as he pulled his head up as high as he could manage to get some view of what was going on in the other room.

He had screamed her name more times than he could remember since the Seekers burst through the door and she had clumsily thrown herself in front of their attack. Each of his cries going without a response. But this time through the doorway he heard murmured words followed by sounds of someone moving on a bed.

"I don't think..." began one of the Seekers.

"I'm fine," countered Wanda's voice, not letting the other speaker finish. From Ian's viewpoint on the floor shadows in the other room shifted and then she was standing in the threshold. Her blonde hair was messy and disheveled, her clothes rumpled. Distressingly there was splotches of red on her pale peach colored blouse, dried blood from where the bullet had hit her right arm. Now said arm was wrapped protectively in a sling. But she was alive and whole.

Wanda stumbled forward to kneel before him. "Ian!" she sobbed.

Looking up at her, Ian could see even though she had been asleep for nearly twelve hours, dark circles were under her bloodshot eyes. Yet he could not help but grin, he was so relieved she was alive. "Hi sweetheart, I'd give you a hug, but I'm kinda tied up."

Already tears were forming in her exhausted eyes. But she did return a little smile at his joke. She leaned over and he felt Wanda's small hands on his restraints. Tugging on them, but they were fastened far too strong for her to remove. Straightening up, she moved out of his view, but he could still hear her. A growing shrillness carried in her words.

"Release them! Release them all, right now!"

Figures moved in and out of the room and into the corridors beyond. From Ian place on the floor it was hard to tell who was here. He heard conversations going on but could not tell who all was speaking. Seeker Smoke Weaver appeared to be one in charge, or at the very least he represented the Seekers sent to retrieve Mia. He had no idea where everyone else was. Things had gotten very chaotic since the Seekers had shown up. He hoped they were in no worse shape than he was.

Another body moved into his field of view and it was finally someone Ian recognized. Seeker
Nigel, or to be accurate – former Seeker Nigel. The young Soul knelt down next to him and began to work on removing Ian's restraints.

"I'm sorry," he spoke in a hushed whisper. Ian felt a nervous tremble in Nigel's hands as the Soul worked. "I couldn't get the Seekers to stop. They wouldn't listen to me."

Beside him, Simon let out a loud sigh, "You're not the first to find their military runs around with their heads up their asses." His comment elicited a puzzled frown on Nigel's face.

"Oh behave, Simon. He's too young to understand what you're saying," scolded Annie to her husband. She had managed to flip herself onto her side and was watching as Nigel worked.

The cuffs on Ian's wrists finally came off and he was able to move out his uncomfortable position. He started to remove on the ties on his feet while Nigel moved to help Simon. As he worked, Nigel complained, "Why does everyone treat me as if I'm a foolish infant? I understand what you are talking about. I was just contemplating Simon's comment that the Seekers are becoming much more 'Human-like' in their reactions." A sad look settled on Nigel. "Will they start treating other Souls as if we're the enemy?"

Seemingly to answer Nigel's question more sounds of quarreling filtered in from the outside hallway and the source was not from a Human. Ian could distinctly hear Wanda and Long Rivers voices mixed in with the Seekers. Something rather extraordinary was happening, Souls were arguing with other Souls. Not a debate, not a discourse. An outright, angry feud was building between the normally peaceful aliens.

Seeker Smoke Weaver reentered the room with Wanda right on his heels. The Seeker was a powerfully built man, with well-developed muscles in his shoulders, arms, and legs. His host body had likely been a soldier when a Human mind ran the body. Yet what grabbed everyone's attention was not the imposing figure of Smoker Weaver, but Wanda.

Staring Smoke Weaver down, her gray-silver eyes narrowed. Her face red with genuine animosity, Wanda jutted a finger into the Seeker. She was shorter and only managed to tap the bottom of his sternum. But it was still enough to make the Seeker take an intimidated step back.

"Who do you think I am?" she said in a near hiss. "Do you take me for a newborn? Still learning how to handle my first host? I know what I saw in Mia's memories."

"I have had eight full lives," declared Wanda. "I am Lives in the Stars. I have faced down a claw beast on the mist world. I have been more, seen more than you can possibly understand."

"I.." began Smoke Weaver with some difficulty. He took a deep breath and started again. His voice was tight with stress. "Again… I...apologize for the incident. But if you would have simply told us your plan to insert yourself into the Human child we could have prevented..."

"I am not a Seeker. I do not report to you," snapped Wanda. "Mia did not trust Jade or any of you for her well being. And after seeing how you and the other Seekers acted today, I know her concerns were more than justified."

Wanda's anger, a genuine rarity, did not last long. It faded and was soon replaced with a biting despair. "And I nearly killed her." She was gazing down at the floor, blinking back tears. She managed to keep her composure and looked back up at Smoke Weaver. "You cannot perform another insertion on Mia. It will kill her and destroy the mind of any Soul you put in her."

The Seeker was shaking his head. "We will need much more detail of this supposed alliance
between the rebel Humans and the Vultures."

Wanda forced a frustrated breath out. She leaned against the wall, trying to give her exhausted body some rest. "We've all been warned how the beginning feels like the end. You know this?" she asked wearily. Smoke Weaver nodded impassively. "Well let me tell you," Wanda went on, "with Mia, every moment is like the end. Each memory razor sharp. A million jagged memories cutting into you. I was in her for only a short time and even I began to lose myself."

His eyes going wide, Smoke Weaver shifted her gaze to the room where Mia remained in a coma. "The girl is that strong?" he questioned.

"The Vultures made her that way," explained Wanda. "Either on purpose or by accident, I don't know which."

"She is dangerous, a threat to all of us," announced the Seeker.

Long Rivers, who had entered to hear the Seeker's assessment of Mia, made an annoyed shake of his head. "She is unconscious," countered the Healer, "and is no danger to anyone."

"You realize how this all sounds?" question Smoke Weaver. Fuming he turned back to Wanda, "What you report is insane. Nearly impossible to believe. The Vultures have been dead and gone for millennia. Yet you say they are still alive and building weapons for the Humans, but offer no specifics. And there is no way for us to learn more from the child. How am I to report this?"

Wearily Wanda half closed her eyes. "I've told you what I've seen. You need to warn the others. If you happen to think I'm crazy and confused what I saw in Mia's memory, or..." and voice darkened yet again with irritated exasperation, "...think I'm lying, then all I can say is you're a moron."

Smoke Weaver turned and looked at Ian, Simon, Annie and then to Long Rivers and Nigel. Finally, resting his gaze back to Wanda he shook his head and said sourly, "You seem to have lost polite manners among these Humans, Wanderer."

Pointedly ignoring the remark and the Seeker, Wanda made her way over to where Ian and the others. They were all sitting on the floor, stunned at the exchange between the two Souls. As she bent down, Ian put his arms around her and Wanda sagged exhausted against him. He held her tight.

Nigel cleared his throat cautiously. Stepping closer to Smoke Weaver, he spoke to his former peer. An attempt at brokering an agreement. "Perhaps, Seeker, we could talk to Jade. She was the one who initiated the plan to insert Mia. We could make a report to her. Let her question Wanda."

"I see little else I can do. I will have Jade of the Hollows reinserted into her host body and bring her here," grumbled the Seeker after he had considered Nigel's proposal. He glanced around the room and occupants again, ostensibly displeased with everything that had happened today. "Our troops will remain here," he added sternly, "and control the situation."

After Smoke Weaver stalked away, Wanda pulled her head from Ian's shoulder. "I'm so sorry," she mumbled out an apology to the Humans. "I promised to protect you. I haven't done a very good job."

Ian shook his head. "It's not your fault."

"It's the damn Seekers and their never ending quest to be the biggest assholes," fumed Simon.

"Which is not helped by your idiotic attempt to attack them with a surgical blade," offered Long
Rivers curtly.

Annie was quick to her husband's defense. "Are you saying they were right to bust in here, try to take Mia, and shackle us like cattle?"

"No! Of course not," said the Healer. "But that doesn't mean threatening them is right either."

Simon did not back down. "So we're just to roll over and take it? Again? Do what your kind says no matter what?" The doctor's nostrils flared, and his voice rose in outrage. "Hunt us down and use our bodies? No problem! Make the rest of us live like sewer rats? Love to! We get to the point where you kind doesn't instantly want us disposed of? Swell, but we better do everything you say or else!"

"Stop it!" cried Wanda. She was shaking like a leaf in Ian's arms. Tears were rolling down cheeks. "Just stop it! I can't take anymore. Please no more fighting. We're supposed to be working together, to live together."

Simon let out a deep sign and his eyes were dark and distant. "Maybe," he muttered, "we simply can't."

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"by the time I managed to drag myself from the morgue you guys had set fire to the building. The whole place went up fast, and I got lost in the smoke. If Kyle and Jared hadn't come when they did, I would have been a goner."

Jodi finished and let out a deep sigh as she settled back in her chair. It was draining to recount everything that had happened to her over the last few days. Of Sunny waking up, her talk with Directory Smith, and his subsequent betrayal. Finding Samantha's body and then the terrifying encounter with the Vulture Asag. Last but no least the overhearing of all of Williams's revelations.

They were making use of the abandoned coffee shop in the terminal with Jeremy and Keith sitting across from her and Kyle. Wayne, the pockmarked faced man, stood nearby with Jared as the two watched over the five captured Souls. The aliens had remained sitting on the floor, their heads bowed and kept very still. But Jodi was quite sure they also had been listening as she made her account. In fact, everyone had focused their attention entirely on her, even Kyle and Jared who had already heard her tale.

'You're a good storyteller,' whispered Sunny. 'Wanderer couldn't have done it better.'

'Umm...thanks,' replied Jodi mentally, uncertain what to make of Sunny's praise.

Jeremy was the first to speak out loud. It was evident he was trying to wrap his mind around everything she had told them. "Jodi, this is all just so..."

"Crazy?" supplied Jodi. "Yeah, I know how it sounds. And I haven't gotten much in the way of proof beyond showing you where the bastard creature drilled a hole in my skull."

She made a vague wave of her hand at the bandage on her temple covering the needle-thin puncture wound. Strangely it still did not hurt, and she wondered how that was possible. "But stop and think about it," she continued, putting effort into not thinking about the long syringe that had been embedded in her head. "This CURE drug, have you ever heard of any our medicine that could do something so complex? Inhale it and the alien parasite in your head loses control and your mind
reboots. Literally rewiring your brain. Sam straight up confessed to me nobody had any idea how it actually worked."

Keith snorted. The shorter man's eyes were distrustful as he watched her. "Big deal, so these Vultures things made it instead of us humans. Who cares who created it, so long as it works."

"You idiot," argued Wayne, "She just got done saying Doctor Greer had an aneurysm from the stuff." With a meaningful glance towards Jeremy, he added, "I told you something was messed up about her death. Williams saying one of the Seekers strangled her at their headquarters. It didn't add up. Nobody saw it happened. Just like Director Smith's 'accident.' There's more going on here."

Jeremy bristled, becoming defensive very quickly. "Mr. Williams told us last night he had to keep certain things from us. He was under orders from the Facility. Director Smith could have forced him to cover it up." He paused and shook his head. "I don't know what to think about Smith's death. I just know we've got more important things to worry about."

"Don't you see that's exactly what this Williams guy wants?" put in Kyle. "Running around here while he yanks your chain and keeps his secrets. He sure didn't give any of you a tour of the morgue and show off their mystery guest."

"Shut up!" growled Jeremy as he turned to glare at Kyle. "You can joke, but you don't understand anything! We've all woken up to a nightmare. Where these things..." and he waved a hand at the captured Souls "...have wiped us out. But we're not going to sit around and just take it like you did. We're fighting back!"

"You think I don't understand? Or didn't try to fight?" scoffed Kyle. He leaned forward, to look Jeremy in squarely the eye. "I fought! Damn near got myself captured or killed more times than I can count. I was hunted and had to do things I never dreamed of doing."

His voice dropped and went almost to a whisper. "You talk about waking up to a nightmare? Well, I lived through it all. Our end. And I've been where you're at, so damn angry all you can see is red. All you want to do is make the buggers pay. But it will eat you up inside."

Kyle fell back into his seat, a great weariness settling on him. "I'm not trying to excuse what the Souls did." and his sharp blue eyes became sad as he turned to look at Jodi. His gaze was soft but at the same time penetrating, looking right into her to where Sunny lay curled around her spine. "But they're not all monsters," he said softly, "and we don't have to all be monsters either."

Both Jeremy and Kyle had stared each other down as Kyle spoke. Each man firmly set in his opinion. Jodi could see how similar both were. She supposed this was why she had been initially attracted to Jeremy. The two of them both bullheaded and determined to do what they thought was right. Eventually Jeremy's gaze flicked away from Kyle's and focused on something far away. Keith appeared uninterested in continuing to talk with her. But after checking over his prisoners, Wayne stepped closer to the table. Of the three men, he seemed to be the most leveled headed. "What do you want us to do?" he questioned.

"Nothing has changed," broke in Keith before Jodi could get out a syllable. "We have a job to do here. We're collecting up as many of those Cryotanks as we can. They're our insurance policy. As long as the buggers are cooperative, none of their frozen buddies get hurt." He shot Kyle a withering look and added disdainfully, "See, we're not monsters. We're just going to be the ones in charge. Helping to put humanity back on top."

Wayne was shaking his head before Keith had even finished talking. "I want to know more about these Vultures. Jodi, you said they've been on Earth a long time. Experimenting on us, stuff like
"I only know what I overheard Craig Williams say," answered Jodi. "But when I was alone with Asag he tried to make me behave. He got all scary, with his wings outs. And God help me, but he did look like a demon."

And so..." she fought for the right words, trying to make meaning out of her terrifying time with the alien. Williams had said they were the truth behind the legends. "If...If it's true, then long ago people saw them and didn't understand that they were aliens. And if the rest of them are like Asag, they're ruthless and cruel. It would've been natural to call them by the names we knew...devil, demon, monster."

"Or maybe they were trying to help us out," countered Kieth. "Get us ready to fight the parasites. Be the one race who could come back even after having one of the buggers in our heads. But we were primitive and didn't understand what they were doing."

"Possibly," conceded Wayne. He eyed the captured Souls sitting on the floor. "The worms have screwed over who knows how many other races. About time someone teaches them a lesson. Maybe we are the 'chosen' ones. But I'm little worried about our miracle CURE turning out to be cursed."

"We don't know what caused Samantha's aneurysm. Could have been caused by any number of things," retorted Keith.

Both men continued to argue and debate over Jodi's revelations, but Jeremy remained silent. He was still looking off into the distance, his mind far away.

"Jeremy," pleaded Jodi, "talk to me."

Without looking away from some far distant spot Jeremy started to speak, his voice nearly toneless. "Director Smith said the parasite you were carrying woke up and tried to take you over. That when you were restrained it shredded your brain and killed you. A lot of people got scared when they heard. Worried theirs might wake up too. Smith eventually told us why it was important to keep the things in our heads. To make ourselves immune. So we could become strong and never be used again."

"He was lying about me," she said.

His eyes finally turned back to her. "But your parasite did wake up. That part was true."

"Yeah, Sunny did." admitted Jodi.

"And it tried to control you again. Carol and Jake heard it speak with your mouth. Saying how we shouldn't fight. To not harm any more of its kind."

"It wasn't..." began Jodi. She sighed and tried again. How did she make him understand neither herself nor Sunny knew how it had happened. "It wasn't like that. Sunny wasn't trying to control me. It just sort of slipped out."

His voice had shifted from a blank dispassionate inflection to one with a slowly simmering anger in his words. His gaze was now centered directly on Jodi. "Can it speak to me now? Use you as a puppet again?"

Kieth's and Wayne's arguing came to a halt as Jeremy's voice had slowly but steadily risen in volume. "Well, can it?" he repeated.
"I-I don't think so," she answered. She shrugged her shoulders. "It's not like we've had time to try."

"This...Sunny, It hears and sees everything you experience?"

Jodi nodded.

"So if I ask it a question, you can answer?"

Jodi nodded again. She could feel Sunny timidly pull forward in her mind. The Soul was frightened by Jeremy but wanted to help ease the man's worries. They both wondered what he would ask.

"Seeker Bending Reeds was in my head for the better part of seven years," began Jeremy slowly. "During that time I'm pretty sure he used me to hunt down at least seventy people, likely much more. Students mostly, but plenty of others." He paused and then went on. "Last night Carol did the operation to remove him. So now I'm immune, the Souls can never use me again. Worst they can do is kill me."

Sunny had listened very carefully as he spoke. 'I guess that's good. He can't be taken over and be used to hurt other humans anymore.'

Jodi informed Jeremy of Sunny's opinion. "She says that's good."

"I didn't ask my question," replied Jeremy coolly.

"Oh...Okay, sorry," said Jodi. She was beginning to worry. Jeremy's eyes focused on her with such intensity.

"See my question is this: After Bending Reeds was taken out and I was awake again, I picked him up. You guys are tiny little things. Fit in the palm of my hand. Actually kind of beautiful, not like anything I'd ever seen before. Then I dropped the little guy on the ground and ground my foot into him till he was nothing but a silver smear on the floor."

He waited a beat and then asked, "So how does Sunny feel about that?"

"We had to knock some heads after Mitchel's boys managed to break through," floated the voice of Madison Brinsfield from the tiny speaker in Williams's two-way radio. "But the buggers are now in full retreat."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Williams in response to the news the Souls had been beaten back at the hangar. Nodding to himself he added, "Tell me as soon as Noah is finished, the clock is ticking..."

Pocketing his handheld radio, he gave her a knowing smile. The one that bothered her so much. "Exciting times to live in."

This Noah was likely stealing away the cryotanks from the spaceships thought Melanie. She questioned Williams on the prospects of his plan, "Do you really think the Souls are going to just let you keep those cryotanks? Or allow you camp out here?"

"Need to think bigger than an airport," replied Williams. From their vantage point in the control tower, they could see all of downtown Los Angeles. He stretched his arms wide and framed the
busy metropolis of towering skyscrapers. "Got an entire city. A new safe-haven for humanity and for the Souls who learn their place, a little bit of mercy."

He was insane. He had to be. She watched as Williams pace about the control room. As time passed her captor seemed to be filling with nervous energy, he was all but bouncing on his feet as he pushed out orders to his troops. From the sound of things Madison and the others had managed to fight off a large force of Souls. They had held the cryotanks hostage and threatened to destroy them if the aliens attacked. Melanie had to admit this strategy could be very powerful. Souls were not ones to sacrifice their own. Especially the ones sleeping away in the refrigerated silver tubes. But even with the forces he had assembled, it would not be enough to fight off the swarms of Seekers that would inevitably gather to take back what Williams had stolen.

"You don't think I can do it. I can see it on your face." He was looking down at her, still smugly smiling. Yet there was something cold and distant in his eyes. With a soft sigh, he said, "A revolution is coming. Nothing is going to stop it. And what I'll build here will be preferable to the Souls over what the Vultures have planned."

"See," elaborated Williams, "the thing I learned about the Vultures is they're not gods or demons. You saw they can die readily enough. And they're not omnipotent. They've made plenty of mistakes in the past."

"But," he said as he waggled a finger, "what you do need to understand is they are schemers. They have plans within plans. If one strategy fails, they have another ready to go." Settling back down in his chair he continued, "That's why I didn't try to fight them. It's inevitable. So I joined in. I was the good little soldier carrying out their orders. Biding my time till I could seize control."

A buzz sounded from his belt and interrupted his speech. He quickly pulled out the radio and acknowledged the call. A voice unfamiliar to Melanie came out of the tiny speaker. "We're in business! Twelve ships have downloaded the program and are accepting our controls."

"Great work, Noah," lauded William. "Get those ships sealed up and then get out there."

Noah confirmed, and Williams returned the radio to its holster. For the next couple minutes he worked silently at one of the control room's workstations. His eyes focused intently on the screen Melanie was beginning to see there was more than just capturing cryotanks. Something to do with the spaceships. The sleek and massive vessels designed to travel from star to star. Williams claimed a revolution was brewing. But how did the Souls' starships make that happen?

It occurred to Melanie even now Williams might not know the Vultures entire plan. If they were as cunning and calculating as he claimed, they could be hiding their true objectives from everybody. He could have an inkling, but not know the specifics. Williams apparently planned to steal the cryotanks and to hold them hostage. The spaceships would be an excellent way to steal them.

Abruptly Williams began talking. He had picked up one of the traffic controller's headsets and was speaking into its microphone. His words were slow and precise. "This is LAX in Los Angeles, California. Alive and online. Code phrase is 'Odysseus.'"

Wondering if he had indeed gone off the deep end, Melanie challenged, "What are you doing!?"

"A transmission," explained Williams gamely. "Once we completed the reprogramming of the Souls' spaceships we are to make a broadcast at a particular frequency with a specific phrase."

"Why?"
"I have my suspicions, but I'll be honest, I'm not sure who's supposed to reply," admitted Williams as he turned back to the workstation controls.

A minute passed silently and then another as they both waited for something to happen. The open channel hissed with a low rumble of static but nothing else. Melanie crossed her arms and began to wonder if everything Williams had told her was complete nonsense. Just the ramblings of a man driven insane by what had been done to him.

At almost the third minute the silent radio channel gave a sudden hiss and then a rush of feedback. Following quickly after the squawking noise a man's voice echoed from the control room's speakers. "Hello! This is DFW in Dallas, Texas. Alive and online! My passphrase is 'Diomedes.'"

Williams made an approving nod. "Thought so," he said almost too quietly to be heard. Pressing the send button, he spoke into his microphone. "We're receiving you Dallas. This is LAX in Los Angeles." He went on to repeat his coded message to the man broadcasting from the Dallas airport.

"Damn glad to be hearing you LA," replied the mystery man. This was a distinct southern twang to his voice and there was a boisterous excitement in his words. Not like a Soul.

"Likewise," said Williams. "You have control of your site?"

"Indeed! Surprising what you can do with some fertilizer and fuel oil. The buggers are busy with a big hole downtown," came the unruly reply through the speakers. Defiantly not a Soul.

"This is ATL in Atlanta!" interrupted a new speaker on the channel. The voice belonged to a woman, her words came hurried and harried. "We're hanging in there, but we are most certainly alive and online. My passphrase is 'Ajax.'"

"We hear you!" called out Williams. He repeated his introduction followed by the man from Texas.

On the radio channel a soft sob of joy could be heard coming from the woman in Atlanta. "You have no idea how happy I am to know we're not the only ones."

"You doing alright Atlanta?" asked the Texan.

The radio transmission caught part of an angry laugh. "The worms have been a serious pain. But we're in control for now."

Melanie had listened to the entire exchange between these three rebels in separate cities in open mouth amazement. The dawning realization Los Angeles had been only one of the cities chosen by the Facility. The same uprising happening here was being carried out in at least two other cities. Williams was right, a revolution was at hand. She sagged heavily into her chair, utterly shocked.

Turning from the workstation's controls he saw her staggered expression and nodded. "It's like I said...Plans within plans."


Sunny screamed.

There was not any sound to her cry. The Soul was still regulated to little more than a ghost in Jodi's mind. Audible or not, Jodi winced in pain as Sunny let out a wail of despair over the death of
another Soul.

'Why!? Why would he do that? Jeremy can't be a host anymore. Bending Reeds could have been put in a Cryotank where he could never hurt another Human. There was no reason to kill him!'

Jodi knew why. Revenge. It was simple. It was easy. You hurt me, now I hurt you back. You used me to hunt down humans, now I crush you with my foot. Little over a week ago when Jodi woke up, she had wanted to do the same thing to Sunny. It was a chilling thought. If Sunny had never woken up, Jodi would have had no problem getting rid of the parasite. Then she would be here with Jeremy and others, attacking the airport. Would she have been killing any Soul who stood in her way? There was not a vast difference between her and Jeremy.

How to explain that to Sunny? The Soul in the back of her head was nearly as guileless and innocent as a child. Wrath, anger, revenge, they were all such foreign concepts to her. And yet her kind had driven humanity nearly to extinction. All while cheerfully believing they were doing it for the greater good. Maybe conflict was inevitable when two races had such different ways of seeing things.

Nobody had said anything or moved. Jeremy was watching her like a hawk. Eyeing her carefully for a reaction. Next to her she felt Kyle tense. His face going pale at the news of Jeremy's casual confession of killing the Seeker. Keith looked bored, seemingly unconcerned. But it was Souls sitting on the ground nearby, largely forgotten, who reacted first.

"Animals," said one of the gray-haired Souls. She was staring wide-eyed at Jeremy, her face stricken with horror. "You are nothing but animals. We made this beautiful world perfect. No hunger, no violence. Peace and prosperity for everyone. And all you want to do is destroy us."

Then a little a twitch went through her body and she slumped to the ground. The other four Souls saw the body topple over and faster than anyone could react the other old woman and the teenage boy joined her. All three still and lifeless, as if they were marionette whose strings had been cut.

There was one moment of stunned silence and then everything erupted into angry shouts and confusion. Both Jeremy and Keith jumped up, their expressions hardening into masks of rage. They rapidly zeroed in on the two remaining Souls, eyeing them for retribution. Wayne was closer but was still standing stunned at the sudden suicide. But of everyone, it was Jared who was the fastest.

"Drop the guns!" he shouted, and Jodi had to believe Jared had moved faster than the blink of an eye. He was standing behind Wayne, one of his arms wrapped around the lanky, pockmarked faced man's chest. His grip had pinned Wayne's arm against his flank. The other man struggled to break free but stopped when Jared's other hand, wielding a hunting knife pressed up against Wayne's neck.

Kieth and Jeremy froze in surprise at both Jared's speed and his previously undetected weapon. But they were quick to recover and their guns came up and took aim at Jared. Putting Wayne right in the middle.

"I said drop it!" snarled Jared as he pressed the edge of the blade into Wayne's neck.

"Whoa! Whoa!" shrieked Wayne in high pitch alarm at both Jared's blade and his companions training their guns on him. "Everybody calm down!"

Jeremy wavered, his clouded eyes full of anger started to fill with some uncertainty. Keith, however, grew only more determined.
"I can take a shot," said Keith. His tone was confident. "Won't even graze Wayne."

Wayne was far more skeptical. "The hell you can! Everyone put their weapons down!"

Jeremy's gun began to lower but Keith's hand stood steady. He did not budge, determined to stand his ground. Not moving at all until Kyle body slammed him.

It had again happened so fast Jodi had nearly missed it. Kyle had been close enough she could tell out of the corner of her eye when he began to move. He was so quick to be just a blur of motion as he rushed Keith. Using his whole body like a weapon, he smashed into the smaller man with enough force to send Keith sprawling on the floor a good eight feet from where he had been standing. Knocking him out cold.

Now only Jeremy remained. A sudden wild, frantic look began to build in his eyes. He shifted from the two remain Souls, sitting in utter horror over everything happening, to Jared and Wayne, and then on to Keith and Kyle. His gun was pointed at the ground, but his hands twitched nervously.

Jared sensed the rapidly escalating situation, and he eased his knife away from Wayne's neck. "Listen," he said a softer voice. "We're just here for Melanie. Williams has her, and I want her back. I can't even guess what you guys are going through." He made a small nod towards where the three Souls lay dead on the ground. "But we all know this isn't right. Not like this."

Slackening his grip, Jared let his captive pull away. Wayne rubbed his neck sullenly but did not retaliate. Jared pointed at the two Souls still alive. They were still cowering terrified on the floor. He addressed them, his voice calm and even. "Don't suicide yourselves. Don't you see? You're only proving to these people they're right about you Souls. That you're all killers and the only response is to be a killer."

Jodi managed to find her voice. It felt like hours had passed, but in reality, it had been less than a minute. She focused on Jeremy. He stood between Jared and Wayne, and herself. His hands were no longer twitching, but the frantic look in his eyes remained.

"Jeremy," she said slowly. "You told me you have an older brother and father. Don't you want to save them? If you go after them like this..." and she opened her arms wide to indicated the unfolding tragedy, "...You'll just end up getting them killed."

He turned to her in a stilled, almost broken fashion. His face was devoid of any emotion, but his eyes were distraught. Lost in a sea of pain. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. We're meant to be the ones in charge. We're going to save the world."

Then Jeremy's arm jerked upward, and Jodi dully realized he was pointing the gun at her. She froze in shock. Shouts came, but they sounded so far away. All she could see was the barrel of his gun. Polished black metal gleaming from the overhead lights. Jeremy's finger tightening on the trigger.

And then Kyle was there. Right in front of her. Acting as a shield. Her protector.

There was a loud bang and the sound echoed around the empty airport. Kyle's body jerked and fell. A ragged hole in his back, dark red blood already beginning to spread.

Sunny screamed again and this time it was given voice by Jodi's own cry. Their twin shouts of the exact same word:

"KYLE!"
Ian knew about the exit strategy. The rebels in Chicago had survived for too long in the occupied city to not make one. Before Marc had left with the Seekers, Ian had been included in a very private meeting. Marc's concern was after the Seekers successfully tracked and destroyed the Facility, their little band would become a liability. Something for the Seekers to quietly get rid of, away from any friendly Soul's help. A scheme was laid out to escape from their captivity and get back into the tunnels below the city. Like many of Marc's ideas, it was bold, cunning, and just a bit crazy.

Wanda inhaled sharply as Scott outlined their plan for a jailbreak. "You're going to burn the hotel down!?

"Shh!" hushed Scott as he nervously looked about, watching to see if any of the monitoring Seekers noticed Wanda's outburst. After he had been satisfied none did, he started to elaborate. He continued to speak in low murmured whispers. "It's not like we would destroy the place. Just set a fire as a distraction."

"If we needed to do it," clarified Ian, "we would have set it in the middle of the night. When the Seekers' attention would be minimal. Make our escape in the confusion." He peeked out into the hallway where several of the black dressed Souls stood, keeping a watchful eye on the Humans. "I don't see how we do it now. They're all over the place and got this place in lock down."

"Well, I'm open to amending the plan," offered Scott. "We just need the Seekers distracted long enough to make a break for it."

Wanda breathed out slowly. "If you run now...the Seekers..."

"Wanda, no offense, but wake the hell up," lashed out Scott in a barely contained whisper. "We are prisoners here. And even that status is getting shaky. The Seekers' patience is at an end. We are quickly reaching a point where they no longer need or want us around."

Ian bristled at Scott's harsh words to Wanda, even though he could not really disagree with anything the man had said. He bit back his anger, knowing it would only further aggrieve her to listen to him and Scott fight. He expected she would make a compelling case, in reasonable terms, why they should stay.

So he was quite surprised when she turned her weary eyes to Scott and nodded slowly. "You're right. This isn't working."

"Wanda?" questioned Ian.

"I wanted both Humans and Souls to live together in peace," said Wanda. She looked around at the few Chicago rebels who sat silent and pensive, like condemned prisoners waiting for the gallows. "But not like this. Not where the Humans are kept under lock and key by my kind. Under constant suspicion because even though there is only a handful of you, we're still frightened of any Human."

She let out a lamented sigh, "I had hoped it would get better but its only gotten worse."

Scott let out his own pent up breath, a release of his own frustrations. "There is no peace when there is still anger and fear."

"We Souls claim we're above such negative emotions but in these bodies..." Wanda drifted off, staring down at her petite frame. "Maybe," she continued, "those feelings have always been there. We just didn't want to admit it."
Her expression was so sad Ian only held her tighter. He was careful to avoid squeezing her bandaged arm. Hoping in some way he could make it better. To take away her pain. But there was not anything he could do but hold her. They remained like this for a long time. His arms wrapped around her and her blonde curls covering his chest like a blanket as she pressed her freckled face into his body.

Eventually, Wanda stirred, raising her head up. "Scott," she said in a hushed whisper, "may I offer an alternative plan which does not require you to set fire to anything and likely get yourselves all killed."

Scott gave her a slightly rueful smile. "I'm listening."

"The Seekers are here because of Mia and their attention is focused on Mia. She can be your distraction."

Frowning, Scott asked, "How?"

"Have Long Rivers move her to Northwest Memorial Hospital. He still has authority to make the transfer. The Healers will care for her and do their best to help her recover. During her transfer and relocation, many of the Seekers will be paying more attention to Mia than to you."

"They'll insert Jade or some other Soul into her! They'll kill her!"

Wanda emphatically shook her head. "No, they won't. No Healer would ever knowingly endanger a Soul by inserting them into an unstable host. Long Rivers can explain what happened to me and the Healers will not allow such a procedure to happen while Mia is in their care."

Scott was still unconvinced. "Mia will be considered defective. Souls have a policy of disposal of 'unsuitable' hosts. Don't they?" He practically spat the words at Wanda.

"Hey," broke in Ian as he saw the pained look on her face at Scott's accusation. "Long Rivers never supported stuff like that. He won't let them do it."

"The Healers at the hospital have not forgotten what you and the others have done," said Wanda. "You saved so many lives. They are your stronger supporters among the Souls."

"I don't know," said Scott with a sad shake of his head. "You're talking about abandoning Mia while the rest of us run."

"Scott," appealed Wanda, "she needs medical care. More than what Simon and Annie can do for her. Let us help."

Scott's narrow face twisted with the turmoil of trying to make such a momentous decision. Weighing the good of every Human in Chicago to the life of one child.

"Would it even be enough?" he asked in a strained voice. "The Seekers aren't going to completely ignore us if we move Mia."

"I believe I can offer myself as an additional distraction," replied Wanda. "When Jade is back in her host body she will want to speak with me. I think I can pull enough attention away for you and the others to make your attempt." She looked away, not meeting either man's eyes. "Afterward I'll have an opportunity to watch over Mia."

Ian felt a cold shiver run down his spine. He turned her to face him directly. "Wanda, what are you saying? You need to come with us."
"Ian," she whispered. He saw her tears already pooling in the corner of her eyes. "I came here to find a way to bring peace. To get the others to listen. I have to stay."

His answer was automatic. "Then I'm staying too."

Her lower lip trembled and more tears weld-up. "No...It's too dangerous."

"It's dangerous for you as well. What if the Seekers put you in another body or...or..." and he found his voice breaking. "Ship you off Earth."

"I won't let them!" she said fiercely. "This is my home. My life. I will not leave it."

"Then come with us!" he demanded.

"Look," said Scott. "If we make a break for it, it's not just to the tunnels. We'd have to get out the city. Wanda, we'll need you to help get us through the countryside."

Now it was Wanda's turn for the upheaval of trying to make an impossible decision. Worry and fear masked her half closed eyes. "I suppose," she said at last, in a voice so low Ian almost did not hear her. "If I lie. Tell the Seekers I remember more details from Mia's memories. Spin stories about the Vultures, make them believe there is a nearby threat. Use my lie to create the distraction."

Ian groaned. "Sweetheart, you are still such a crappy liar. It won't work."

"But the Seekers are desperate to learn what's happening with the Facility and the Vultures. They will want to believe me."

Ian was about to argue with her when Scott held up a hand. His eyes had become resolute, he had made up his mind. "It's risky as hell, but it could work." A very faint smile brushed his face. "Marc's pulled off even more insane stunts. Guess it's my turn."

"There is one thing I ask," said Wanda. Her face was as grave as Ian had ever seen her. "If I deceive Jade and the Seekers, I will destroy what little trust they have in me. After that, they will not believe anything I tell them."

A shudder went through her. "I don't know what type of weapons the Vultures were building for the Humans, but it cannot be good. Seekers are searching for the Facility and Marc and Bright Moon are with them. Please, you must send a warning."

Scott nodded in agreement. "We need to talk to Eric."

###

"Well, you can't say I've never taken you someplace nice."

"Oh," remarked Bright Moon on Fallen Snow as she glanced around the neatly trimmed green lawn surrounding the runway. Turning back to her companion, a touch of good humor grew on her face. "Is this your idea of a romantic getaway?"

"Sure," said Marc Walters with a wide sweep of his hand, "we have an entirely pleasant airport in the middle of nowhere. Surrounded by trees..." He gazed off into the distance, evidently examining the extensive wall of green beyond the borders of Sawyer International Airport. "...and more..."
Bright Moon nodded. "It is a nice change from the city. I've not had a chance to see much of the natural state of this world."

"Blah," griped Marc. "Wild animals, poisonous plants, and miles upon miles of dark forests. If you wander out into it, you'd likely get lost and eaten by a bear or something."

"That certainly would be ironic," joked Bright Moon. "Me, being eaten by a bear."

"You laugh," said Marc with a shake of his head. "But all this is very disconcerting for a person like me."

He stood up from their table, really just a wide bench outside the main terminal. It was a flat, unremarkable gray building, standing as a sentry to the bustling activity of the Seekers on the airfield and the buildings beyond. Long ago the airport had been a military base. Human aircraft, designed to deliver terrible weapons of destruction, had been stationed here. But even before the Souls had come to this world, a softening of tensions among the humanity's nations had led to the base being closed and converted into a civilian site. While it no longer contained weapons of war, many of the buildings were still designed for military use. It made for an excellent staging ground for the Seeker task force.

With Seeker Sage of Tides planning to meet with them later today to review what had been found, Bright Moon and Marc found they had little to do. They had been wandering around the empty airport. Strangely Bright Moon found she did not miss her work. Ever since she return to her host body, she had found her calling to be unfulfilling.

"You've never been outside Chicago?" asked Bright Moon as she stood up to join him.

Marc considered. "Umm, once, when I was really young. Traveled with my parents to visit some friends of theirs in the south. Don't recall much of it, just that I had to eat this disgusting fried mush for breakfast."

"No curiosity about what laid beyond the city? No desire to travel?"

Marc lightly thumped his chest. "I'm a city boy, born and raised. Everything I've ever needed I could find on the streets. Roads and towers, glass and steel, tunnels and walkways, that's my forest. I know how to survive in it." He gestured once again to the expanse of the activity happening both at the airport and forests beyond. "This is completely outside of my wheelhouse."

Bright Moon watched as a group of Seekers finished loading a helicopter. Soon it would be taking off to search over the vast wilderness making up much of northern Michigan. Seeking any sign of the concealed base of the Facility. All this morning her people had been working steadily to hunt and probe every potential hiding spot. As the helicopter's blades began to spin, Bright Moon contemplated Marc's last words. "Which one troubles you? The wild woods or the Seekers?"

Marc paused. "Both," he finally said.

Bright Moon took Marc's hand in hers. She tried to offer comfort. "I know. But at least this will be over soon."

Marc's soft brown eyes were distant. "This morning I tried talking to Sage again. Explain to him this whole plan sucks. But he's resolute." He cast his eyes to the very far end of the compound. "He's sitting down in that bunker of his, playing general."
Sighing, Bright Moon replied, "Marc, we need many Seekers to search thoroughly. Enough to counter any weapons they might have. Any other way will take longer. Risk more innocents getting hurt or killed."

"I know, it's just..." He paused as he articulated what he wanted to say. "All those times you were hunting me, did I ever do what you wanted me to? Didn't I always countered your plans with my own?" Remembering the many times Marc had eluded her, Bright Moon's lips pressed together and nodded grimly.

"What I'm saying is - Never fight your enemy on their terms." Beginning to walk back towards the squat terminal building, he added, "And running up to this never-ending forest is doing exactly what the Facility wants."

Walking with him, she asked, "You still think a sneak attack is coming? We've been extraordinarily careful. Monitoring for any type of weapon, radiation, or unusual chemical. We've seen nothing."

After pushing through the double doors into the airport's terminal, Marc turned to her and shrugged. "That's what I keep trying to explain to Sage. It's a gut feeling. He thinks I can simply see the danger and point to a spot on the map so he can send in the troops. I see the same things you Seekers see. But I can't shake the feeling we're missing something important."

Bright Moon fell in beside him. "You Humans are better at deception and warfare than we Souls. I think the ability almost borders on instinct."

"Gee, thanks," quipped Marc.

"It's the truth," reflected Bright Moon, "and I don't mean it as an insult. You are what you are, and we should be listening to you."

"Well," reflected Marc, "at least you do."

She smiled at him affectionately. "You made a believer out of me, Marc." But her smile was only halfhearted. Unfortunately, the other Seekers did not want to listen to her. Yesterday, after arriving at the base, Marc had seen the cold shoulder Bright Moon had received from many of the Seekers. Oddly he had taken great offense at her ostracization. She really did not know what to make of it. Marc returned her smile as they walked hand in hand. Strange such a simple action could make her feel so happy.

The concourses they passed through were deserted. The airport effectively closed as the Seekers conducted their work. There were few regular Souls to be found. So both Marc and Bright Moon were surprised when they saw a Soul rapidly approach. He was older, a graying silver running thickly through his hair. The wrinkles around his eyes were wary as he came to a stop before them.

"Are you Marc Walters?"

"Yeah," replied Marc slowly as he curiously eyed the Soul.

The old man nodded with a loping movement of his head. "I had heard the Seekers say they had brought a wild Human with them. Very peculiar." He shifted to Bright Moon and asked, "He is allowed to move freely about?"

"Marc is working with us, he is trying to help," said Bright Moon. Seeing the continued apprehension on the other Soul's face, she added, "He is no danger to you."

"He has not tried to create problems or sabotage?" questioned the Soul.
Bright Moon grew confused. "No, Marc has been with me the entire time."

"Standing right here," grumbled Marc as he watched the two Souls discuss his activities.

The Soul looked at Marc oddly. His mass of wrinkles shifted as he seemed to reach a decision. He addressed Marc, "My name is Tenor of the Dawns, Ted to most."

"Singing World," mused Marc. "Did you live in the night valleys?" He grinned at the look of complete astonishment on the man's face.

Taking pity on the stunned Soul, Bright Moon explained, "My friend is quite well versed on the planet of the bats. Could you please explain what's going on?"

Ted nodded, again with a wide nod of his head. "I'm responsible for general maintenance of the buildings. I've been taking care of the office while we're closed." He hesitated, still eyeing Marc suspiciously. "Something very odd is going on with the phones. They will ring and when I pick up, no one is on the line. It has happened over and over." He pointed at Marc and said, "There is no incoming number for the call, but his name appears on the caller id each time."

Bright Moon shook her head, trying to make sense of what Ted was saying "What does this mean? Who is doing this?"

"Eric," muttered Marc. He rubbed his forehead, pained by what he had heard. "It was one of his magic tricks he could do with a phone. Make it show any name or number he wanted."

At a loss, Bright Moon asked, "Why would he do this?"

"He wouldn't unless it was important," replied Marc with a troubled look. "He couldn't do it from the hotel, only from his equipment in the tunnels." Turning to the other Soul, he added, "I need a phone."

"Easy enough," said Ted with a shrug. "Your friend keeps calling, every few minutes. Would it have been so difficult for him to just ask for you?"

"Well Teddy," Marc answered, "Eric and I live in a world where being Human can quickly get you dead or worse. So we're more than a little paranoid when communicating over a phone."

Giving Marc a troubled frown, Ted lead them over to an empty counter. A fancy phone with rows of buttons sat to one side. Marc snatched up the receiver at once and began to dial a long string of numbers.

"Aren't you going to wait for Eric's next call?" question the Soul.

Still pressing numbers on the keypad, Marc did not look up. "Nope, the incoming call was just a beacon to get my attention. A different number is used to reach Eric. That way he can't be easily traced."

"Impressive," said Bright Moon.

"Convoluted," said Tenor in the Dawns.

Marc put up a hand, requesting silence. Both Souls went quiet. After a long time, so long that Bright Moon was wondering if anyone would ever answer, Marc said, "Eric, this had better be damn import…." He was cut off by the speaker on the other side of the call. She could not make out what was being said, but Marc's expression first became perplexed and then stiffened in alarm.
"Whoa...Whoa...Ian! Slow down!" broken in Marc, as he tried to get a word in edgewise. "Who's here!?"

Williams muttered to himself as he operated controls Melanie could only guess at. His attention was completely focused on the screen before him. His hands rapidly tapping out commands on the keyboard. With his concentration elsewhere, Melanie was considered how she could escape her bonds and best stop him.

From her vantage point in the tower, she could see the wide bodies of the Souls' starships lining up on the runway. Whatever had been done to the ships Williams had gained remote control of the craft and was preparing them for takeoff. The transmissions from Atlanta and Dallas had gone silent, as those rebels were also working away on their own ships.

Despite everything he had told her about his plans for humanity and the Souls, Melanie did not trust him. He was a twisted and broken man. A part of her wanted to feel sorry for him. But it was outweighed by a growing sense of dread Williams was about to unleash something horrible.

She studied the chain linking her leg to the console. Its thick metal band would not be easily broken, nor could she easily pull it from where it was tied to the console's table leg. To get it off her leg she would have to cut her own foot off.

The speakers hissed to life once again and a transmission came through. "I think we're as ready as we're ever going to be," said the Texan. "We've got eight viable ships ready for takeoff."

"Ten available here," supplied the woman from Atlanta.

"That's thirty ships in all. Is that enough?" asked the Texan.

"It's going to have to be," announced William. "We've pushed this little uprising as far as we can go without drawing too much attention. After this, there is no turning back."

Melanie scanned the console in front of her. She was getting very troubled, things were moving fast. The screen showed inbound flights to the airport. Nearly all were in a holding pattern, waiting for instructions on where to land. By now those on the shuttles must know something was wrong. Could she contact them and send out a warning? But what did she tell them? That Humans were stealing the Souls' spaceships full of cryotanks. They would never believe her.

Tugging on her restraints, the chain rattled but did not give an inch. But it was enough to get Williams' attention. "Where are you taking the ships?"

Williams did not turn from his work but gave a little shrug of his shoulders. "You know, anything can be a weapon. You just need to know how to use it. Thanks to the Vultures, we can make those ships do whatever we want."

"What do you mean?"

"Throw a stone at somebody and you can break a bone. Shoot a gun and an even faster bullet kills. Scale it up and the asteroid which ended all the dinosaurs was just a big rock slamming into the planet." He turned and swept his hand out, a full swing of a gesture covering all the spaceships lined on the runway. "While they're not giant rocks, the Souls' ships are very, very fast." His terrible smile was back. "What goes up, will most certainly come down."
His answer only served to further confuse her. "What? I thought you were stealing the ships for the cryotanks."

"We already offloaded the cryotanks," replied Williams in a matter-of-fact tone. "No, at the speeds the ships will be traveling, when they'll hit it will be like a nuclear bomb going off."

Melanie felt all the blood in body drain away. A cold, empty horror filled her veins. Altogether the Facility forces had thirty Soul starships. Each one now a weapon of mass destruction. She had thought she understood what was happening here. She had been so wrong. "No..."

Williams nodded gravely. "I told you the game had changed, Melanie. All revolutions are painful, they are always born in blood."

Melanie was on her feet, desperately tugging on her shackles, trying to reach Williams and his control board. "Please!" she begged, "Craig, please! You'll kill thousands...millions!"

"To save billions. It's an easy decision to make."

Beyond desperate, she fought to break her bonds but they held fast. She pulled and yanked with all her strength to no avail. Williams's hand moved to the keyboard, ready to initiate the launch. With one last try, Melanie implored, "You said you wanted to save people, even give mercy to the Souls in bodies we couldn't bring back. How many will you murder by crashing those ships! Don't do this!"

He stopped, his hand hovered right above the execute button. She saw Craig Williams shoulder sag downward. Moving to face her, a sadness great enough to fill an ocean had settled on his face. His alien silver eyes held a deep longing like he was holding on to the last good memory from long ago.

His reply was soft and heartfelt. "Even before the parasites came here I was a doomed man. I brought death to more people than I ever want to remember. If my soul is to be damned..." and he let out the smallest of laughs at his play on words, "...then let it be for casting the stones that free our people."

And then he pressed the launch button.

###

The arrival or departure of one of the starships was always a momentous occasion. It either herald the delivery of new colonists or the emigration of those traveling to another world. Those seeing one of the sleek white vessels take off or land would often cheer. It was a sign of continuity for the Souls, for all their worlds were connected and united in peace and prosperity.

The sight of twelve ships launching all at the same time was something never before seen. Those Souls around the airport, frightened and still in shock by the Humans' brutal attack, could only stare in confusion as one ship after another soared into the clear blue sky.

They rose smoothly, almost majestically. The ships autopilots flawlessly carrying out the programmed instruction. In atmosphere they used engines much like the smaller shuttles. Quick and efficient propulsion carrying them to edge of space.

High above Earth, where the air had thinned to nearly nothing and the planet curved away beneath them, the twelve ships launched from Los Angeles joined with eight coming from Dallas and the
ten from Atlanta. Thirty ships in all.

In unison, they powered up their main drives. Powerful engines designed to carry the ships between the vast distances between stars. Then, one by one, they launched outward, on trajectories taking them directly away from the planet.

In primitive chemical rockets, mankind had made the trip to Earth's nearby moon in three days. For the Souls' starships, the journey only took twenty minutes. Nearing the orbit of the desolate and crater filled orb the ships slowed. Ten ships broke off from the rest. They maneuvered to put themselves into wide, looping, orbits around the planet. Waiting for further instructions. The remaining twenty ships pivoted gracefully and pointed themselves at the world they had just left.

The Vultures' program uploaded by the rebels began to alter critical systems in the ships. Navigation controls protecting the craft from plotting dangerous courses were overwritten. Safety instruments within the engines were disabled, and their power levels began to build towards overload.

One final message was transmitted from the ships. "Kingdom Come." A Biblical phrase, meaning the ending of one world and the beginning of another.

Then like a stone slung from a slingshot the Souls' spaceships catapulted back towards Earth. Engines screamed as they hurdled down, their speed ever increasing. Faster and faster, far beyond their design.

The first ship hit Earth's upper atmosphere and even in the wispy air the hull of the vessel glowed white hot. What would normally be a controlled descent was now a hurtling ball of fire descending at speeds beyond easy comprehension. In less than a heart-beat the ship dove through the sky, from high above to the ground below. Burning brighter than the noonday sun.

It was aimed directly at Tokyo, Japan. In one cataclysmic instant the ship obliterated itself as it hit the center of the city. A thunderous shock wave from the impact tore outward, salvaging the surrounding buildings. They crumbled like matchwood, broken and ruined. As the super-heated blast carried outward it weakened but still wrought massive damage, fires erupted everywhere, every window for miles around shattered and turned into high-speed shrapnel.

There had been no warning or escape. The peaceful populace could only react in the most basic response of terror and chaos as the city burned. Yet the disaster was only the first of many. With pinpoint accuracy the other vessels impacted one after another...Beijing, New Delhi, Moscow, Cairo, Istanbul, Berlin, London, New York, Buenos Aires, Mexico City.

Hammer blow after hammer blow.

Nor were the ships aimed only at the largest cities. Near the towns of Barstow, California, Madrid, Spain, and Canberra, Australia were the arrays of large dish antennas. At one time the massive receivers had been a part of NASA's Deep Space Network, built to maintain contact with humanity's spaceships and probes. The Souls had re-purposed the sites to be their connection to their other colonies. A voice to the rest of their people. In a single moment all three were annihilated.

There would be no call for help.

The last three ships turned to bombs streaked into the atmosphere. The first came down on Washington DC, directly upon the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover Building, now the Seekers' worldwide headquarters. It was turned into a vast smoldering hole in the ground. The second was aimed at
Chicago. The city and its inhabitants had twice defied the will of the Facility. They had sought to break the metropolis through illness and then the terrorist. Now they brought fire. The explosion hit right in the center of the tall glass and steel towers of the city. The last ship was not aimed at a metropolis or communication hub, but the Sawyer International Airport near Marquette, Michigan. The base of operations for the Seeker army assembled to track down the Facility's hidden base.

A warning had been brought, but it had arrived too late.

The ship impacted on top of the bunker where the Seekers were directing their search. The fortification had been designed to withstand a nuclear blast, but no one had ever dreamed it would be hit by alien spacecraft moving at a fraction the speed of light. Stressed far beyond it design the support columns of the bunker began to crack and break. Remarkably it held up against the onslaught for a few scant seconds, but it was inevitable. With a loud groan of ruin, the walls of the bunker buckled and entombed all inside.
Cheers erupt in the command center as the monitors display the results of the ships crashing into the parasites' cities. The chorus is soon joined by excited shouts from down the hallway in the research labs and then on to the dormitories. Echoing off the carved stone tunnels until it becomes almost like thunder.

Around me the others offer congratulations to Alex. I also hoot soft notes of encouragement. Alex has learned enough of our language to understand me. He gives me a small nod of his head in acknowledgment of my praise.

Together we have struck an enormous blow against the silver worms. Never in the parasites' long history has a conquered world rose up. They have become complacent, believing themselves the new masters of the Earth. I exploited their mistake, but it was Alex who conceived of drawing the worms in. Their Seekers are massed, quite literally at our doorstep, ready to be exposed to my CURE drug. 'Gift wrapped' as Alex would say.

I watch him as he moves around the room, talking to many but also watching. Studying everyone's reactions. He is a good leader. In many ways he reminds me of Alulim, that young chieftain I taught so long ago. Alex is daring and cunning, but he still has much to learn. Like his long distant ancestor, I will need to continue to guide him.

Now Alex is giving orders, and his subordinates are quickly carrying out his instructions. We must move rapidly to capitalize on the chaos we have created. Soon the Humans from Atlanta, Dallas, and Los Angeles will be arriving on confiscated shuttles. They will form the seeds to grow an even larger force from the assembled Seekers.

My brethren will also be returning in secret with the nascent army. They had traveled to each city to oversee the capture and conversion of the infested. It was a very dangerous task and I have worried greatly for their safety. Asag's health has been declining in recent years. We have already lost so many. All sacrificed for our great endeavor. But now, finally, everything is falling into place.

As the reports continue to flow in, some of the Humans go silent. The full impact of what we have unleashed is becoming clear. It is one thing to understand in principle the destruction wrought by a kinetic kill weapon; it is another to see the devastation with their own eyes. They have just slaughtered millions of their own kind. True, they were infested with the loathsome silver worms, but it is still a difficult thing to witness.

Neil Lenson has become a close confidant to Alex. Many times the older man has offered Alex console and support. As he and the others watch burning buildings, he grimly nods and says, "Well, now we are all sons of bitches." The others wordlessly agree.

Humanity will endure this loss. I know it. Likes so many times throughout their history they will suffer, grieve, struggle, rebuild, and in the end, emerge stronger than before. Their capacity to absorb such punishment has always been there, right from the very beginning. It is why I chose them…
I stood on our ship's bridge, looking down upon the water world. Within the planet's gray seas, life has flourished. Our surveys have even revealed intelligence among the many aquatic lifeforms. A bizarre plant-like creature of many leaves and even more eyes. They cluster in vast forests at both poles of their planet. My research has shown their network of roots tie them together and allows a type of communal mind. Most fascinating.

But they could not help us. These aliens will never be able to fight the parasites. In their ocean environment developing a technological civilization would be impossible. How would they forge metal or build machinery? They have no arms. How could they travel through space? Their race is forever tied to the black soil of the sea floor. Like so many others we had discovered, they are a disappointment.

Since our exodus began, I have seen so many wonders. Worlds of ice and fire, thick oceans of clouds surrounding mountains made out of pure diamond, huge dry basins where oceans lay until they were boiled away, and a planet's last dying day as it circled into its sun. And so many types of lifeforms. We have found an endless diversity of creatures among the worlds we've visited. But none like us.

Are we such a rarity? My people had accomplished so much, forging our way from our simple beginnings until we were able to walk among the stars. We have found no one who is our equal. Only primitive beings barely comprehending who we are or what we want. We need ships and armies! Someone who can fight the parasites!

We have never lingered long on the planets we visit. If there is no sign of intelligence, we resupply and make what repairs are necessary to our ship and move on. With nothing of value found here, we prepare to leave this world and its multiple suns. Like so many times before we return to the cold sleep chamber. To once again freeze our bodies and stop our aging as we travel into the dark void between the stars.

Our journey was to be short. Worlds were orbiting a nearby a single yellow sun. By our calculations the third planet should be capable of life. With our course set, the ship's automated systems take over, and we begin to pick up speed.

Perhaps we overlooked some critical device. Or an undetectable flaw had developed in the engines. In truth, it was an inevitability. We had traveled for so long and so far, pushing our ship beyond its original design. Many pieces of equipment had been repaired and replaced numerous times to keep our vessel operating. Eventually, our efforts failed.

In the depths of space, our primary drive suffered a catastrophic explosion. Only by the slimmest margin was our ship not completely destroyed. Emergency systems took over and we awoke to find our ship - our home - in ruin. Adrift far from any place we could land and make substantial repairs. We fixed what we could, and a grim reality began to quickly sink in. It would be impossible to make the ship's engines work again.

We could not turn around; our path was already set for our next target. But at our current speed what would have been a relatively quick crossing between the stars would now take much longer. Many centuries would pass to complete the journey. We could survive in the cold sleep chamber. However, there was too much damage to the automated systems. Someone would have to remain at the control center to help run the ship. It would be a death sentence to whoever stayed awake.

I volunteered. I had the most years ahead of me. I could watch over the ship the longest. But my logic was turned against me by the others. I was the youngest, so it would fall to me to help breed offspring. The responsibility to carry on our race was mine. Instead, our leader chose to remain on guard.
I had grown up under his tutelage. All that I was, I owed to him. Without his guidance and command, we would have all been lost to the invaders. Now he would sacrifice himself so the rest of us might have a chance. To watch him stand tall as the rest of us returned to our hibernation was very...difficult.

In the cold sleep chamber you are not supposed to dream. Every biological process is frozen in time. It should be an impossibility. And yet I did. I envisioned a massive formation of ships. They were not like any I had ever seen before. Vast vessels which could easily fit a crew of thousands. There were millions of them. So many as to blot out all the stars in the night sky. They hung above a cloudy world. It was not a planet I had before visited. Many colorful layered clouds swirled silently as the ships waited.

I could not see who they were, the creators of these alien ships. But in my dream, I called to them. "Who are you?"

From their ships, they answered. A thunderous chorus of voices, louder than anything I had ever heard. "We are your sharpened blade. We are your vengeance given form. And we shall never stop till we purge the parasites from the universe."

Awareness slowly returned to me. The effects of being in cryogenic suspension for such a long time. I did not know what to make of my dream. Such a strange thing. Perhaps it was manufactured by desires deep in my own mind. I did not dwell on it, I had more important issue to attend. We found our leader's desiccated remains at his command station. By himself, he had operated and acted as steward of our ship while it sailed between the stars. I do not know how much time he spent all alone. He had died a long time before we awoke. But his sacrifice had saved us. Our ship had limped into orbit around the third world of the yellow sun.

We explored this new planet. It was a place of many extremes. Large blue oceans of water and thick green forests of tall vegetation. Frigid sheets of snow and ice and vast dry deserts. Mountains and wide-ranging plains. The complex ecosystem produced myriad forms of life. We studied it all in great detail, for our ship would never travel between the stars again. For better or worse, this world was our new home. Our hope to find allies to fight the silver worm invaders was abandoned.

It did not take long before we learned we would share this globe with another race. They were barely above the other animals, living in simple mud huts or caves. A very crude creature with strange colored fur on their misshaped heads. With broad shoulders and stumpy arms. I suppose at least they had arms to manipulate tools in their thin fingered hands. But their 'tools' were little more than improvised stones and sticks. We observed them at a distance and did not interact. They had nothing of value for us.

For the time being, we would ignore them. We were busy with establishing ourselves. As plentiful as life was to this world, to us this place was not very hospitable. The yellow sun was too bright and warm. The air was difficult for us to process. The gravity too strong. We managed by using face masks that provided filter air for us to breath and restricting most of our activities to night time. Soon we built a small colony between two broad rivers. The climate was hot to us, but the air was dry which made it somewhat tolerable. More importantly, there was local vegetation we could ingest, a thin reedy plant which grew in the marshy lands between the rivers.

Once we finished with our new home, we turned to producing younglings. I felt the weight of responsibility put upon me. We had a people and our civilization to rebuild. But I was proud to assist in helping restore my kind. Yet over and over we failed. We tried so many different methods to produce offspring, but there were no viable eggs.

We sought to understand why, but we could not find the reason. Perhaps it was due to our long
travel through space. Or our repeated use of the cryogenics to preserve our bodies. For whatever the cause, we could not produce any children.

There was speculation about cloning bodies or some other type of genetic reproduction. But we lacked much of the equipment to make such methods a reality. In great despair, we came to the inevitable conclusion that our small band of survivors was all that remained of our people. I had been a child when we ran from the silver worm invaders. It seemed I was destined to be the last child of my race.

There appeared to be little point in going on and a deep depression fell upon us. It was a strange time for me. I had been raised aboard our ship. I was used to the tight space and cramped living quarters. Now I had such freedom. I discovered the luxury of being able to walk over great distances without confinement, to feel the soil under my feet. During the night, if I happened to have few tasks, I would take walks. Seeking solace for my despair on my own.

This would lead me to my first up close encounter with the other race. Alone one night I was in the shallow marsh, gazing at the planet's only moon. From time to time, I would recall the strange and vivid dream I had while I was in the cold sleep chamber. As I watched the night sky, I pondered its meaning. But then I was interrupted by a rustling from the reeds.

In the pale moonlight, one the beings emerged from the foliage. Hairy, dirty, smelly, he stood on long legs, but his stout body made him shorter than I. His odd, small beady eyes went wide. For a long moment we stood staring. I believed we both surprised the other. He was dressed in nothing but animal skins, but he wielded a simple tool. A stick with a sharpened rock tied to one end. He clutched it tightly in his hands, waving it before me. Then he started gibbering at me in his crude language.

Stupid creature. I was hardly defenseless. Our journey through space had not been a safe one. I had learned how to wield any number of armaments from an early age. I raised my own weapon, one which could burn through solid rock. Not a very fair fight, and nor would it be a long one. But this primitive surprised me. Instead of fighting, he turned and ran away. Perhaps he had enough intelligence to realize of the two of us, he was the weaker.

I found myself intrigued and in an attempt to relieve my depression and boredom I began to observe these creatures in more detail. Although we were not wrong in our judgment that they were primitive barbarians, I began to learn there was a subtle sophistication to their race. While their language was rudimentary, they could still convey complex and abstract ideas. With their simple tools, they would carve wood or bone into toys for their young. They blew air through reeds cut to length to make simple songs. I found myself intrigued, they had art, music, and told each other stories.

These Humans, as they would one day call themselves, were a tribal race. They split themselves into small bands. A chieftain, a leader, usual a male, would guide and rule over each clan. Eventually, I chose to focus my attention on two of these tribes who made their home along the muddy river banks of the great river. The first tribe was a larger and more successful, ruled over by a young and skillful warrior. The other was smaller and lead by an aging chieftain. The two groups would often compete over resources like food and fresh water. Much of the time the stronger one would drive away the weaker.

The smaller tribe might have perished if it was not for their leader. Age had taken his strength and speed, but he had experience and patience where his younger counterpart did not. The other tribes' warrior would hunt for the biggest and most challenging animals while the older one went for the smaller but more abundant game. The elder chief knew of more places to scavenge for food and
with his two offspring at his side they would just manage to bring enough to feed the others. Yet their decline seemed to be inevitable. Their rivalry with the larger clan was playing out as I had seen countless times before on many worlds. The strong over the weak, the many over the few.

But then the day came when everything changed. It began with the old chieftain's daughter. She was out alone in the marshland, collecting eatable plants when the other tribe's young chief came upon her. At first, she tried to avoid him, but he was fast and persistent. He grabbed her, pulled her close to him. She fought, but he stronger. He then forcefully copulated with her. It was a strange thing to me, he had many mates among his own tribe, why did he want another?

She went back to her father, mewling and sobbing over what had happened. I decided it was just another sign of the stronger tribe dominating over the weak. I was going to move on to other observations when I saw the effect on the old leader. With his daughter crying at his feet, something in the old chief broke. A rage overtook him. He quickly hunted down the other tribe's ruler and challenged him to a fight. Both tribes rapidly assembled, keenly interested in seeing the two battle.

Growing curious, I too carefully watched the conflict. Initially, I thought the outcome was unavoidable. The younger warrior would surely win. Yet the old one fought with such fury and ferocity his opponent was repeatedly wounded. I began to wonder if the elder chieftain, armed with more experience and rage, would win. But in the end, his greater age made him slower, and he began to tire. All too soon his opponent began to dominate the battle.

Grabbing a rock from the ground the younger human began to pummel the old warrior. Again and again, he smashed it against his adversary's head. Leaving nothing intact but blood and gore. Brutal, but efficient. In the end, I was right. The old chieftain was no match for his more youthful rival. Nonetheless, the old one had done such damage to the other leader that he was forced to quickly retreat.

While the larger tribe's ruler tended to his wounds, the smaller tribe mourned over their fallen leader. They took his body and carefully wrapped him in the best pelts and skins of animals he had hunted down in the past. For a long time they encircled his body. Telling stories of his deeds when he was young. Then, slowly, one by one they left the body till only one remained.

It was his male offspring who stayed. The son was still an adolescent, not yet fully grown. For much of the time, he had wept over his slain father. But as night fell and the stars came out he began to call into the darkness. As time wore on, his cries grew louder and more urgent. He screamed at the sky, demanding that someone, anyone, help him.

To this day I still don't quite know why I went to him. Perhaps it was because I felt a kinship with this strange and sorrowful being. I, too, knew what it was like to have everything ripped away. Taken by those who were stronger. When he saw me, his strange little eyes widened in complete astonishment. But he was not afraid. He stood up and stepped close to me. In his primate tongue, he began to speak.

"I am Alulim! Son of the slain Dumuzid! Help me destroy my enemies!"

What did he want me to do? Kill the other tribe? I could do such thing. But their conflict was not mine. What would I gain by assisting them? Still, I could understand his desire to avenge his father. But what had my hopes gained me? My hope for revenge against the silver worm parasites had led us to this dead end of a world. Was I now reduced to taking a small comfort in helping this creature gain his vengeance?

On a whim, I handed Alulim one of my tools. It was little more than a handle with a short cutting
blade. In his long-fingered hand, he gripped it awkwardly as he studied my gift. To me, this was a simple instrument, but to this primitive, it would be something marvelous. Lighter, stronger, and sharper than anything he had ever seen.

I left him there, still studying the blade. I wondered what this barbarian would do with my knife? It did not take long for me to find out. Ostensibly, the madness of the father had carried on to his child. For within a few days Alulim directly challenged the other tribe's leader. While the elder chieftain was experienced in fighting and battle, his son was still growing and was untested. The larger tribe's warrior chief would again have a distinct advantage.

Once more the two tribes gathered to witness the battle and it was evident many members of the smaller tribe were gone. With their leader dead, they had abandoned the son, believing him a fool to continue this fight. The other leader had recovered from his previous fight. He was brash and proud. Clearly thinking he would be the victor over the child of his dead rival.

I was surprised when I saw Alulim approach, my knife was nowhere to been seen. Did he not understand what I had given him? It was something to give him a chance against his superior enemy. I felt a bit disappointed. I would have thought this human would be smarter.

The fight began and it did not go well for Alulim. As I suspected, the other clan's warrior chief was clearly the better fighter. He repeatedly knocked the younger man down, beating and kicking him. He did not finish the battle quickly. He cruelly toyed with his younger opponent. Dazed, Alulim cowered on the ground. The warrior leaned in close to the quivering boy, mocking him for his weakness.

And then Alulim pulled my knife from a hidden pouch and plunged it into his tormentor's neck. The blade cut deep and dark red blood freely flowed from the chieftain's body. He died within seconds. But this was only the beginning. It had all been a ruse. Those missing from the smaller tribe had not run off. They had laid in hiding, waiting for this exact moment. As the larger tribe stood in mute shock at the sudden reversal, they attacked.

I knew from watching Humans in the past that they were a brutal and barbaric race. Yet I had no idea how savage they could be. Alulim and his followers took advantage of the sudden confusion ripping through the ranks of the larger tribe. With my blade held in his slender fingered hand he...slaughtered them. All of them. The young, the old, male, female, it made no difference. When he was done killing, he and his people knocked down the others' mud huts. Erasing any evidence the larger tribe had ever existed.

Never had I seen such a thing – the strong and the many destroyed by the weak and the few. All of this death and destruction had come from my act of giving one human a simple tool. Watching all this play out I had an idle thought. If the silver worms ever came to this world, they would have a difficult time conquering it. These Humans would readily kill their own kind to achieve victory. And it was at that moment I had my great epiphany. If we could not find an ally to fight the parasites...we would create one.

A plan began to form in my mind. True, these Humans were primitive savages, but what if they could be educated? I began to experiment. Alulim's tribe welcomed me when I came to them one night. I had built myself a translation device so they could understand my words, but they did not understand what I was. Their concepts of their world and the universe beyond were hopelessly naive. Yet they held a great curiosity in themselves and were eager to listen as I told them about my people.

In the beginning, I sought to teach them simple concepts of science. Information even the youngest of my kind would know. The tribe listened but seemed uninterested in the knowledge. It was not
until I started educating them about botany and its applications to farming did they becoming attentive. Instructing on how to gather seeds, to plant, and then tend to the growing vegetation resulted in the tribe building new tools to till the land. Soon they had growing crops on their own.

Through my teachings, Alulim and his people flourished. They no longer had to spend all their time foraging for food. Freed from such burdensome labors, they devoted more time to my lessons and further improving their homes. Such eager students and I saw the possibility this race could become so much more.

Alulim grew to become a great leader. He often took my console and I must admit he became a friend. Sometimes I would tell him of my past. All that I had lost. It was not easy, so much of it painful. He did not always understand, but he always carefully listened. Through him I became convinced I was right. These Humans would become our ally. They would fight for us.

However, I found the others to be skeptical about my theories. They had hoped to discover another race capable of traveling the stars. There would be much to teach Alulim's tribe before they could even begin to develop the required technology to match our race. My brethren felt the Humans were merely mimicking my actions and copying my words. It was all a pointless endeavor in their minds.

But I was persuasive and held to my ideas. The truth was we had little else to do. We were a dying people. We could not rebuild our civilization. But we could still create one for Alulim's people. In an effort to sway my companions, I offered a proposal. If the Humans were genuinely progressing through their own efforts, they would not need me. The cold sleep chamber aboard our ship still worked. We could return to space and sleep for a span of time and see what became of the Humans. Reluctantly the others agreed.

A dozen decades passed as our ship orbited the Earth. When we awoke, we looked down upon the planet and saw cities. True, they were very primitive compared to the vast metropolises once built by my kind, but they were cities nonetheless. We returned to the surface, and I traveled to where Alulim and his followers had made their home to see firsthand the effects of our work. The signs of his descendant's progress were everywhere. Buildings and other structures of variable size now stood where there had been nothing but open land. Irrigated fields grew crops in orderly rows. Domesticated animals used for food and labor were enclosed behind fences of rock and wood. And when the humans took sight of me, they fell to their knees.

They...worshiped us. These people saw my kind as some type of divine beings. I worked quickly to learn what had happened and the answer soon became clear. Over the generations, Alulim and his descendants told the tale of our assistance. The story had grown in scale and scope through embellishment and miscommunication as the years passed.

At first, I wanted to correct their mistaken beliefs, I did not need or want their adoration. What we required of the Humans was for their kind to progress, to become a real civilization. However, I began to see the advantages in their faulty faith. They would do as we commanded. We could order them, guide them, mold them as we saw fit.

Many of us started to agree with my assessment. They now saw the raw potential of this race and how we could influence the Humans' development. We could advance them to become our soldiers. In time, we would lead them to stop the parasite race before they consumed even more worlds. Once again we assumed the role of teachers and began instructing the Humans, improving their mathematics and engineering skills.

But there were a few of my kin who began openly disagree with our goals. They questioned if we were any better than our silver worm enemy. Were we not using this race just like the parasites
used their unwilling hosts? The Humans, they said, were nothing but slaves to carry out our will. Nonetheless, I still had the consensus of the many, they were a minority. Yet soon my dissenters were actively trying to stop me.

Madness. Could they not see what I was doing? I was making these Humans stronger. I was improving them. We knew the worms were spreading from planet to planet. If I did not help them, eventually the parasites would make their way to this world. Even with humanity's healthy appetite for battle, it would not be enough to save them. Then they would indeed become slaves.

We reached a point where we were truly divided and uncertainty reigned. I had to do something. I proposed we halt our instruction and again return to the cold sleep chamber. Allow for more time to pass to see the effect of our teachings. To step back from our conflict so we would have a chance at a real consensus. My suggestion finally brought us a measure of unity and we all returned to the ship.

What I did next still shames me. I... sabotaged the cryo-chambers of my strongest critics. They would never awaken from their frozen sleep. It would be seen as a tragic malfunction of equipment pushed far past its original design. There were so few of us left and through my treachery our numbers were further reduced. But I had to stop the division. We had come so far; we could not turn back now. Not when there was still a chance to beat the parasites and avenge our race.

There was a good deal of grief when we came out of hibernation. Those who we lost were greatly mourned. A few felt it was very convenient my detractors were now silenced, but they did not openly challenge me. I was committed to our path. I would not let anything or anyone stand in my way. After that, there were no more disagreements.

We began to lay the foundation of civilization for these Humans. We taught and we influenced. Soon we expanded beyond the region of the two great rivers. There were small clusters of settlements in many places around the globe. Sometimes we were well received other times not. I was not worried. The ones who feared and shunned us would be brushed aside as others of their kind advanced.

Yet still there were problems. I think at some level the Humans understood what we intended for them...and they resented it. They were a stubborn, prideful people, and even though they treated us as superior beings they would not always do what we wanted. As I had seen before, this race would become very hostile when they thought their young were threatened. Lilitu, our best medic, learned this lesson well when she tried run experiments on some of their younglings. Her tests would not have created any permanent damage to the children, but the Humans did not see it that way. Their angry mob was a reminder we were few in number and would have to tread carefully.

There were other incidents as well. Enough to have the others come to me, humbly requesting we change our strategy. They wanted to breed an entirely domesticated stock of humans. Ones who would be totally subservient and obedient to us. But I did not want that. Not a hobbled humanity. I wanted their rage and their will to dominate. I would use their ferocity to make them a weapon against the parasite.

In truth, there was a much more pressing issue which would ultimately decide both our fate and the Humans. Our kind is long-lived, but we are not immortal. Countless millennia had passed since our exodus had begun. Through the use of the cold sleep chamber, we had been awake only a small fraction of those many years. But it added up. Like all things, time was wearing us down. The oldest among us were becoming unhealthy. With our own resources of medicine dwindling it would become increasing difficult to provide them care.

Additionally, I was finding my original plan was becoming unworkable. Simply put, an advanced
space-faring civilization cannot be created overnight. To progress these Humans from separate
groups of savages to a culture which could rival ours would take too much time. We would age and
die before we were even remotely done.

Over our long search through the stars I had learned to be patient. And now we would have to
resign ourselves to further waiting. After much deliberating, I decided how we would proceed. We
had set the spark of civilization to this race. They would now have to carry the flame on their own.
It would take them a long time, but we could skip over much of their struggle. As for manipulating
the Humans, there were more covert ways to manage them. Being their 'gods' was a tiring affair
and we retreated from interacting directly with them. As time passed, the memory of us began to
fade. We became myths and legends, and eventually they forget about the strange visitors to their
world.

So a new cycle began for us. Not unlike our journey through the galaxy we would again sleep as
traveled. But now our destination was not some far away star, but a future where our carefully
cultivated race would be ready to fight for us. Our ship a lonely sentinel above the Earth. Waiting,
listening and watching.

On the planet below human empires arose, flourished, and then fell to dust. They warred with each
other almost continuously. Over everything: Land, religion, trade, and sometimes, like in the
beginning, over one family wronging another. By all appearances their dangerous and destructive
path would seem destined to go nowhere. But I knew better. I had seen the truth of these Humans.
Much of their progress was driven by war. Their constant competition with each other drove them
to develop new technologies. Rock and spear were replaced by the sword and the bow. Shield and
armor overcame tanned animal hides. Weapons forged of iron surpassed ones made of bronze.
Their progress, although at times unsteady, marched inevitably forward.

Every few centuries we would awake to evaluate and examine humanity's progress. Very rarely
would we directly intervene. But we did take samples. For as much as the Humans were
advancing, it would all be for nothing if the silver worms could easily take control of their bodies.
I knew they not only need to be able to physically fight. They would need to be able to resist, their
minds made immune to the parasites' controls.

Although we were limited in resources and equipment, I devoted a good deal of my time to
developing techniques to alter their physiology. I found the Human reproductive cycle offered us a
unique way to influence their evolution. The gestating fetus grows within their females. Capturing
pregnant ones allowed us to make subtle changes to the unborn children. The offspring would be
born slightly different from their parents. The alterations to the genomic structure would then be
carried on by their own descendants. A relatively small number of adjustments gradually pushed
through their population.

Tiny steps forward as countless years roll by. I studied. I planned. I devoted myself entirely to the
task of preparing humanity for their eventual fate. Every so often I would pause in my work and
remember my dream. Over the course of my life I have come to understand. It was more than a
dream…it was a vision. A portent of the future. I know now the vast fleet of strange ships I saw
were built by Humans.

It was no surprise to me when I learned of the parasites' home world – their Origin – was the same
planet I saw in my vision. The future path of humanity has been forged, they shall become my
sharpened blade. They will arise and grow even stronger. In taking back Earth, they will capture
and learn many of the Souls' technological wonders. In time Humans will build their own starships
and my aspirations of turning them into an interstellar civilization will be finally realized. They
will take to stars to track down the parasites. From world to world they will relentlessly hunt. Until
one day, far in the future, their immense armada arrives at the multicolored clouded world of Origin.

And then, at long last, my little race of humans will deliver my final act of vengeance upon the Souls…burning their home world until the whole planet is nothing but a dead cinder.

Chapter End Notes

I'm placing the arrival of the Vultures on Earth around 6000 years ago. The name Alulim is not made up, he was the mythological (with some possible historical proof) first king of Sumer, one of humanity's earliest civilization.

We are now (finally!) at the half way point of the story. From here on it will be a roller coaster of a ride. Struggle, heart break, joy, and redemption will all be in the mix. But not everyone will survive.

-Walker
"Hi, Jen… You busy?"

Startled, Doctor Jennifer Dobson jerked her head up from her laptop's screen and took in her visitor. Neil Lenson was standing in her laboratory's doorway. With a hopeful smile plastered just below his fuzzy mustache.

"No, not especially," she replied nonchalantly as she could. The last thing she needed was to rouse the suspicion of the Facility's security director. She had been too wrapped up in what she was doing and had not been paying enough attention.

Closing out the document she was reading, she saved the file to the laptop's hidden encrypted drive. No one would find it without a very exhaustive search. Satisfied she had nothing noticeably incriminating for Neil to find, she leaned back in her chair.

There was a twinge in the back of her neck. She had been sitting hunched over her laptop for too long. "What can I do for you?" she asked as she absently rubbed her sore neck muscle.

"Not what you can do for me, but what I can do for you," replied Neil. Still with his friendly smile.

Years of practice had helped Jennifer have an iron control over her emotional reactions. Detachment, aloofness, these were required states for her work. Even so, she couldn't help but feel her stomach turn in a knot. Neil was a snake in the grass. It was risky to associate with him, and it was even more dangerous if he was 'questioning' you.

Keeping herself calm, she answered. "Oh, what's that?"

His smile went up a notch. "Lunch!"

Confusion crested on her forehead. "What?"

"You know…eating…drinking…the intake of edible substances." With a casual shrug, he added, "I wanted to take you to lunch."

She sat in her chair, somewhat stunned. "Ah… Umm… Okay," she finally managed to say.

Standing up, Jennifer saw Neil had his right palm out in a 'stop' position. "But," he said firmly, "No work. Don't bring any of it, and don't talk about it."

Still feeling ill at ease around the man, she wondered just what he really wanted. "Why?" she asked with a bit of trepidation, "is there some security issue I should know about?"

"No," Neil said with an empathetic shake of his head. "I just want to have lunch where we don't talk about CURE production issues or neurological effects." He then paused and then added in a quieter tone, "Or anything about the… kids."

Jennifer nodded sympathetically. Of all the people they were returning from the parasitic invasion, children were the most problematic. A Human having an alien parasite governing it's every function from birth or early infancy developed abnormally. Some areas of the brain simply never
matured. While the parasite was attached, it was not a problem. Nearly a thousand silver strands ran through the head from the central body of the parasite, connecting different areas together. Managing and controlling. But once you took the alien organism out, the brain did not know what to do.

They had managed some limited success in treating the children. If the subject was young enough, a concoction of drugs could force the brain into activity. Make it work on its own. The results varied, but more often than not you ended up with a body that operated more like a robot than a person. It could move, it could respond, but it was just...empty.

That created a lot of stress for the newly recovered family members. Actually, considered Jennifer ruefully, it created a lot of pissed off people. And their anger was not always pointed at the invaders. A lot of demands were being made that someone do something. But there was no snapping your fingers or waving a wand to fix it. There were no easy answers.

She had been working on the problem. Attempting different advanced neurogenesis treatments to force the atrophied parts of the brain to function correctly. Devoting all her time to testing and experimenting. Or at least that was what she was telling the others.

Was this why Neil had come to her? Wanting to covertly check on her progress, see if she was doing what she claimed. Very possible. She would have to tread carefully. Paranoia had long been the rule in the Facility.

Lost in her thoughts and worries as they walked to the cafeteria, she did not hear Neil's next question. He had been talking about a baseball game coming up in the afternoon. A sort of intramural league had been put together from some of the nearby towns. Everyone was excited about the first outing.

"Would you like to go?" asked Neil when it became apparent she had not heard him the first time.

"What? To a baseball game?"

"Yes," he replied. When Jennifer did not immediately respond, Neil brought them to a stop in the middle of the access tunnel. "Jen," he said, again with his little unauthentic smile, "we're worried about you. How many times have you been up to the surface in the last two months?"

She paused to consider. "Let me think..."

"You haven't," informed Neil. "You've been topside only once. After the army routed the Souls at Iron Mountain. You met with General Mannheim and his people. But other than that you've been stuck down here."

"I've been working," she defended. But she could hear how weak her excuse sounded.

"I know," replied Neil as they began walking again. "Don't think we're not grateful for what you've accomplished."

She nodded numbly as they moved into the central hall. Truth be told, she felt awful about using the research as cover. Holding out the hope to parents that there previously infected kids could go on to lead normal lives. But she needed it to provide cover for her real work. The painstaking job of piecing DNA clues together to unlock what had been done to humanity. A secret set of abuses that stretched back thousands of years.

Once they reached the cafeteria, Neil took on the role of the chivalrous man to get them both a tray of food. He stood in the lunch line while Jennifer took a seat and waited. The lunchroom, like most
of the chambers in the Facility, was carved out of solid rock. But most of the stone walls were hidden behind aging wood panels and yellowing plastic. These false walls still maintained the illusion this part of the underground base was a stylish house from the 1960s.

Jennifer had called this place home for over a decade. She supposed there was a part of her that really did not want to leave and go to the surface. The safety and comfort of the familiar. The old underground bomb shelter still had a type of charm to it. As if its original purpose as a refuge from a nuclear war was a quaint idea compared to the strange reality of being invaded by a parasitical alien race.

Pulling her out of her thoughts, Henry Timens pulled up a chair to her table and said, "I see Neil finally got your out of your lab."

She smiled faintly at Henry as he sat down. He was about twenty years younger than her. Just a hint of gray touching his hairline. Years ago, when the Souls' invasion was kicking into high gear, they had a brief affair. It had not really been a romance. Just two people seeking comfort in each other as their world fell apart. Maybe if their circumstances had been different or if she were younger, they might have had some type of future together.

"He pointed out that I've had my head stuck to a microscope for the better part of two months," she replied with a little bit of false modesty. Her smile almost felt genuine when she added, "Evidently I was worrying some people."

Henry nodded a bit sheepishly in agreement. Apparently, Neil had not been lying about that fact. "How are you doing?" he asked, keeping his tone mild.

"I'm fine," she replied. "I've had some success…" and she stopped herself as she saw Neil approach. He was carrying two trays of food, and she decided to mimic his earlier warning with a bit of good humor. "I've been given specific orders to not talk about work," she said loud enough for the security director to hear.

This drew the attention of Anna Dangy. The younger woman had just finished her own meal and was putting the remains into a recycler. The food scraps would be mulched and mixed with other waste products to go back to the underground farm. When she was done, she sauntered her way over their table and took a seat next to Jennifer. Neil put her tray of food down before her, a bowl of mushroom and noodle stew.

The three of them, Henry to her right, Anna to her left, and now Neil sitting across from her made Jennifer feel like she was being boxed in, trapped. They were all still giving her friendly smiles. The appearance of friends sharing a meal. But something was running underneath their pleasant expressions. There was subtle tension in their bodies.

Taking a spoonful of her stew, Jennifer swallowed it carefully, playing for time while she worked out what to do. She kept her own facial features a mask. Not letting anything slip out. What was Neil playing at? If he knew what she was really doing, he would not be bothering with this charade. He would have come for her with a squad of his men. Whisking her away to a cell for interrogation. No, this felt like they were testing her, probing to see if she stood up to their scrutiny.

Better to play along, for now. Jennifer let a bit of guilt show on her face. "It's true. I've been stuck in my lab a little too long. I know what I'm doing isn't the most important. Yet if I can just…"

"You should stop," interrupted Neil.
"We don't want to be giving out false hope," added Henry.

"And like you said," put in Anna, "There are more important things to do."

They were still smiling, acting friendly, but the tone of their words had taken on a delicate tone of authority. Like a club wrapped in velvet, cushioned, but still deadly if used.

Long ago Jennifer had wondered how people got pulled into cults. Why seemingly rational people could allow themselves to live in such a twisted lifestyle. Where the group became all important and the individual personality of its members became submerged. How any idea which ran contrary to the cult automatically became dangerous. She had reasoned there must be something wrong with the people who joined. They were weak minded or so desperate to be included they would ignore all reason. Yet here she sat with friends and colleagues, who she had worked with for years, and they were all consumed by what the Facility had become.

It had not started out that way. The Facility had been created in the hope of defending humanity against the invasion. A secret location, hidden far away, where the best military scientists could work together on finding a way to fight the parasites. But as time passed and the Souls took over more and more, fears began to mount. They were losing, and there was nothing they could do. Then their isolation began as they terminated the remaining contacts on the surface to prevent their assimilation by the invaders. Paranoia crept in, worries they would still be discovered. Everything became compartmentalized, everyone continuously monitored. Little by little they were pulled into a new shape. Where they became cogs in a machine who's only function was to find a way to fight back. And as they labored, buried in the ground, the Souls' conquest turned to the outright colonization of the planet Earth.

Then her breakthrough. In the beginning, she thought she had been lucky. A way to reclaim someone who had been taken over by a parasite. A messy and dangerous process, but one that could be repeated with at least with some level of regularity. This allowed their counterfeit Souls to work their way into the aliens' society. Giving them access to equipment and information they had once only dreamed about. It provided the opportunity to launch their first counteroffensive against the invaders - a bioengineered bacterial infection. Her discovery had been hailed as their greatest change of fortune. But now she knew better. She had been allowed to find the process.

Everything had been orchestrated. All of it. The Reclaimed, the infiltration of the Seekers, the Plague, Kane Adams's immunity. Even Alex Winston's rebellion and overthrow of Major Ashby. It was all tests and experiments by the true masters of the Facility. Only now was she beginning to see the true scope of the manipulation. How the alien named Paz and his kind had been lying to them all along. And not just to the people in their underground base. They had been influencing all of humanity for a long time.

Almost everyone else at the Facility had turned a blind eye to these realities. Wanting to believe the promises from Alex and Paz that humanity could be restored to what it once was. The tempting possibility to have their whole world returned made them willing to do the unthinkable.

Only she, Major Ashby, and Craig Williams, one of the Reclaimed, had seen the danger. Originally they had formed a feeble secret resistance. But with Ashby locked away in one Neil's cells, there was little he could do. And then Williams had taken what he had learned from her and Ashby and turned renegade.

She was alone and on very dangerous ground.

Neil and the others continued to smile while watching her like a hawk. Jennifer came to a conclusion, that in her effort to cover up her investigation of Alex's alien allies she had stumbled
into another clue. They did not want her investigating the children and trying to find some sort of therapy. Why? Did Neil actually know, or was he just carrying out Alex's orders?

"Well…" she began. She cast her eyes to her food and then back to her colleagues. "I'm not trying to cause problems."

Henry quickly put in, "No one is saying that, Jen."

"It's just that research into the children is sensitive," explained Neil. "We…indulged you for a while you looked into the issue. And I know it's been a busy and challenging last few months. But now it's time you got back to other work."

The look in Neil's eyes expressed to Jennifer she had few options in this twisted little intervention. She was being told to toe the line. Or else.

Taking a forkful of noodles, she chewed her food slowly. "Perhaps you're right, Neil. I need to take a break from this research." She shook her head. "To be honest, I feel like I was going around in circles."

Neil eyed her careful for a few more seconds and then said, "Well good. I'm glad we got that settled."

Anna, who had not said much, suddenly pushed back her chair and stood up. "It's good to see you, Jen. Hopefully, we can have a real lunch sometime. But I've got to run. We've got the daily broadcast to get out."

"Looking forward to it," replied Jennifer with a fake smile.

Henry gave her a friendly squeeze of her hand and then made his own excuse to exit. Leaving just Neil and her alone in the lunch room. He sat silently while she finished her lunch and she tried not to act nervous. When she was done and had sent the remains on to the recycler, he finally spoke.

"Sorry for the drama. But I needed to make sure you were on the same page as the rest of us."

She nodded. "Like I said, not trying to cause problems. I'm here to help."

"Good," said Neil. He leaned in close, his voice dropping into a low whisper. "There's something we need you to look into. Use your excellent neurosurgery skills."

Growing curious, Jennifer asked, "What is it?"

Neil rubbed his mustache. "It's not a what, but a who. His name is Owen Mitchell."

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Scott swung his pickaxe at the dry clump of soil. This particular clod of earth was really beginning to annoy him. It had so far resisted his attempts to break it apart. He found it grating as he had done a decent job on this section of the field. Only this tiny bit remained. Then he could rest his aching back.

His last swing did some damage to the resistant pile of dirt. But stubbornly it remained held together. Again he hefted the pickaxe above his head and slammed the sharpened edge into the ground. And then again. Sweat trickled into his eyes and burned. Scott blinked hard, trying to
refocus on the hated patch of ground.

From behind him, a voice came, "Try angling that old ax to the side. You're just smacking the same spot."

Scott wiped away more perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand. He turned to blink wearily at Jeb Stryder. "I almost got it," he huffed to the old man.

"Not saying you don't," replied Jeb. "Just giving some advice."

Rolling his shoulders to work out a kink in his neck, Scott went back to tilling the earth. He followed Jeb's advice and with three swings of the pickaxe the remaining clumps broke apart. "Got it!" cried Scott in a tired, but triumphant glee.

Jeb's head bobbed up and down as he surveyed Scott's work. "Yeah, you're getting a handle on working the soil." He gave Scott a wry smile. "We'll give you city folks a green thumb yet."

Scott looked over his efforts. He had carved several rows into the hard, dry soil. Around him, others were working the same plot earth. Some, like Andy and Geoffrey, were tilling the soil just as he had. Others were bringing buckets of water to wet the ground and pave the way for growing a crop of carrots. And shining down on them all, row after row of mirrors reflected the hot Arizona sun into the main chamber of Jeb's hidden caves.

Returning the pickaxe to the underground community's dilapidated wheelbarrow, Scott began to explain their own subterranean efforts to grow vegetables. "We tried doing hydroponics once, you know, growing plants in nutrient rich water."

Jeb leaned forward. He was always attentive to stories from Scott or the others about their time living in the tunnels under Chicago. His eyes were keen with interest as he asked, "How did it go?"

Scott shrugged. "Not that great. Wasn't easy to get the chemicals we needed. And none of us knew exactly we were doing. More often than not it was easier to swipe a bag of fruit or vegetables from one of the stock rooms we had tunneled into."

"Ahh…thievery," said Jeb with a knowing nod. Indicating the entire field, he said, "As much as I would love to be completely self-sufficient, I know all too well about needing supplies from the cities." A sly grin started under his white beard. "Must have been the easy life for you guys when you could just stroll down to the local supermarket for food."

A snort of laughter came from Scott. "Never that easy. Always took lots of planning and patience when we took food or other supplied from the Souls. Marc always made it sound easy…" At mentioning his friend's name, Scott drifted off with an unhappy sigh. "Well, things have certainly changed."

Jeb's smile faded away as well. "They have indeed," he replied in a solemn tone. "The world has grown more dangerous in ways I never dreamed possible."

Around the field, the others were putting away tools and equipment. There had been no announcement of a break, but everyone was acting as if one had been called. The winding down of the work on the field appeared casual. To a visitor to these caves, this pause in their labors might seem like it was spur-of-the-moment. But Scott knew better. There was an undercurrent of urgency. It was nearly two o'clock. Everyone would be heading to the kitchen.

Jeb made it official with a call for a half an hour break. Not that he had much choice. People were going whether it was approved or not. Better to make it look like he had sanctioned the pause in
work than fight the inevitable. And of course, Jeb would be going as well. He was just as interested
in the upcoming transmission as everyone else.

By the time he and Jeb had reached the kitchen, the hall was swiftly filling up. Scott made a quick
head count and came up with thirty-two. There had been talk about moving these gatherings to one
of the larger chambers, but their radio worked best when it was close to the surface. So everyone
would have to squeeze in. Scott saw Greg and Nancy enter from one of the other passageways and
revised his number to thirty-four. And people were still filing in from other parts of the cave
network.

Nancy gave a friendly wave to Scott as they passed. Her other hand held tightly on to her
boyfriend. She was still acting as the pillar of support for Greg. Scott waved back and made an
attempt to catch Greg's attention. He wanted to know how the teen was doing. Greg did return a
quick, fragile, smile. But it disappeared quickly. The young man was still in mourning for his
father, Paul.

Greg's grief was a luxury Scott could not afford. If he started thinking for long about those who
had been lost - Paul, Annie, Simon, Mia, and Marc - he would shut down. The sorrow would crush
him as surely as the tunnel collapse which had claimed Paul's, Simon's, and Annie's lives. Mia was
lost somewhere in a city brought to ruin in an instant. Likely dead, if not from the explosion, then
from the slow decay of her brain injury. As for Marc...Scott shook his head, forcefully pushing his
morbid thoughts away.

Instead, he focused on those still alive. Those he had managed to rescue and bring to Jeb's caves.
Sarah sat holding her baby beside Lucina while Alexis played on the floor with Freedom and
Isaiah. Ross and Terry stood chatting with Trudy and Heath. Down in front, near where the ham
radio was located, Jason leaned against a table, his arm around Lacy's waist. The two of them had
become quite the source of gossip in the caves since they had gotten together. Scott had not been
able to get to know Lacy when she had come with Wanda to Chicago a few months back.
According to Jeb, she was more than a little high maintenance. But somehow the plain and down to
earth Jason was making their relationship work.

A few stragglers managed to squeeze into the now jam-packed kitchen. It was getting noisy with
everyone nearly standing on each other. Scott scanned the crowd but could not find Ian. He did not
know if that was a good or bad thing. Ian had been in a continual funk since Wanda had left.

"Afternoon Jeb," welcomed Lily as she made her way past Andy and Heidi to where Scott and Jeb
were standing. She gave Scott a friendly smile as she came to a stop and he tried very hard not to
blush.

"H-Hi, Lily," said Scott with a little stammer in his voice. He always felt continually tongue-tied
around the caramel-skinned woman. Lily's smile remained as she returned his greeting but there
was a distance in her eyes. He wondered why.

"So Jeb," asked Lily, not letting the moment of awkwardness between herself and Scott slow her
down. "Have you heard anything new from Nate's group? Was Sunny...or, umm, Jodi able to get
them the medical supplies?"

"Did indeed," replied Jeb with a bob of his head. "Had a quick chat with Nate and Burns last night
over the radio."

Lily's eyes lit up upon hearing the news. "So both of them are doing better?"

"Much," replied Jeb. He made a small wave towards Scott. "From the sounds of things Scott's
friend Kate had been doing an excellent job of nursing both Burns and Nate back to health. With the supplies we sent, they’ll make a full recovery."

"I'm happy to hear it," said Lily, her relief palpable. A crooked smile then appeared on Lilly's face. "What did Burns and Nate think about Jodi's and Sunny's little arrangement?"

Jeb chuckled. "I could practically hear their eyebrows raise across the radio."

Both Lily and Scott laughed. Lily then turned to Scott. There was still a sense of unease between them, but she did give him a friendly pat on his arm. "I'm glad your friends were able to make it Nate's place in one piece. Sounds like they've been a lot of help."

To his credit Scott kept his voice steady. "I am too. We were damn lucky to get out of Chicago. Then having Dell and me split our group up and come clear across the country." He shook his head. "I want to say it's a miracle nothing else went wrong, but…"

He was cut off by a multitude calls for quiet and a steady drowning of hushes. The constant rattle of conversation in the kitchen began to fade. It was two o'clock, time for the radio transmission to start.

Now the only sound was the steady hiss from the radio. A whistle of feedback came from its speaker and then a fanfare of trumpets. Since its discovery two weeks ago, the broadcast had always started the same way. A sound off of horns. A clarion call for attention.

"This is the voice of the Human Resistance!"

The speaker was a woman. Her speech was rich and full. Neither young or old. Scott had never heard her give her name. She only referred to herself as "The Voice."

"To all my brothers and sisters hearing me for the first time. For those hiding and living in fear. I say to you - Despair no longer! The invaders have not won! We are still here, and day by day we are growing stronger!"

"For all of you who have heard my voice before, we open as always with the most important piece of information for every human to know – How to remove the wretched parasites from our bodies."

Then what followed were the detailed instruction on how to successfully remove a Soul. Laid out, step by step, so even someone with basic medical training could successfully carry out the procedure. There were warnings explaining recovery for a young host might be difficult. More explanations came about how to care the former hosts. What was not discussed was what to do with the removed parasite. No talk of Cryotanks or how to care for the fragile creature once it was removed from a human body. There was no need to explain how to dispose of something so hated and unwanted.

Everyone in the kitchen sat silently as they heard the Souls' most closely guarded secret blasted out on a shortwave broadcast with enough power to be heard on the other side of the planet.

"Sources have told us of resistance fighters in the country of Colombia using this information to win a decisive battle near the city of Florencia. The invaders in that town are now in full retreat."

It was hard to know how to feel, reflected Scott. To clap in jubilation or mourn those who had died. Like a stay of execution for a condemned man, you wanted to whoop in celebration. Their extinction had been canceled. This was what everyone in this room could have hoped for, humanity reborn. But at what cost? The death toll from the starships turned to bombs was enormous. Whole cities were in ruins. Battles, like the one being reported from Columbia, were starting all over the
world as isolated pockets of Humans began fighting back. Thanks to these broadcasts they were now armed with the knowledge to make themselves very dangerous to the Souls.

Yet all these conflicts paled in comparison to the power that had risen from the ashes in northern Michigan. The Seekers had amassed a massive fighting force, aimed at locating and destroying the mysterious Facility. But the people of the Facility had turned the tables on the Seekers. They had been armed with a new weapon. A black gas called CURE. There were few details on how it worked. But Scott had seen its effects. Any Soul exposed to the dark cloudy CURE would quickly lose control of their host, and the original mind of the body would be restored. Now the Seekers' army was the Human Resistance Army.

As if on cue, The Voice shifted from reports of human rebels' activities to news from the army. Unlike the skirmishes carried out by the small bands of resisters against the Souls, this militia was reclaiming vast swaths of territory.

"Today we have a special surprise for our listeners. We are going live to the front lines in the battle to retake Madison, Wisconsin. We will be speaking with none other than General Patrick Mannheim, leader of the Human Resistance Army."

Scott perked up upon hearing that name. He leaned forward, focusing every bit of his attention on what came next.

There was a rise in static. Sounds grew more distorted as if they were coming out of a deep well. A reoccurring staccato started coming through the radio's speaker. A constant thudding noise. At first, he could not place the sound. Then the broadcast stabilized and the echoing reverb lessened, and Scott realized what he was hearing.

"Cannons…" he whispered.

"There must be dozens of them," breathed Lily, her eyes wide, as she listened to nearly continuous thunder coming from the guns.

Jeb gravely bowed his head at their assessments. "They're shelling the city. Bombing them into submission."

The radio emitted another squawk and then a man voice could be heard. He sounded young and very excited. "…General Mannheim, you and your army have racked up win after win against the parasites. Cities from Minneapolis to Detroit are now free and under Human control. How goes the current battle to retake Madison?"

After a pause, an older and a more authoritative voice answered. "We are advancing on the northern and western fronts. There's still resistance on our southern flank, but I am determined to break the parasites' hold on the I90 highway. It's their last line to get supplies into the city. After we take that, the city will fall."

The younger man peppered Mannheim with more questions. Most of them about previous victories in the past month. Battles where the Souls had been decimated. Solidifying the idea humanity's triumph over the aliens was inevitable. Scott continued to listen carefully each time the General answered. Even though his words were distorted across the broadcast, he began to recognize the similar pitch and tone of the voice. Scott knew he had heard Mannheim speak before when the man was leaving with Marc and Bright Moon. At the time it was with a different name and mind in control of the body.

Jeb was closely watching Scott. The old man's eyes sharp with curiosity. "Is it him?" he asked.
Scott nodded once. "Yeah, I'm sure now. This General Patrick Mannheim was Seeker Sage of Tides host."

"Hey worm!"

From his cover in the shadows, away from the street lights, Jared watched as Wanda flinched from the armed guard's sudden outburst. She had been walking down the sidewalk, trying to look inconspicuous and not doing a good job. But then that had been part of the plan. With her head down and her shoulders slumped, Wanda's reply was the epitome of meek and harmless. "Y-Y-Yes?"

"What are you doing here!?!" he demanded. "You're out past curfew." The other three men at the checkpoint turned from their own activities to focus on the little blonde haired Soul. The first guard thrust his arm out and pointed to a spot in front of him. "Get over here," he ordered.

Wanda gulped, and her pale skin went an even snowier shade of white. Jared had been uncomfortable with this part of their plot, but he had to admit she was doing an excellent job of appearing frightened. Then again, the four men at the checkpoint were dressed in combat armor and each carried an automatic rifle. They were very threatening.

Trembling, Wanda slowly approached the indicated spot. When she reached it, she stopped and managed to stutter out, "I-I didn't…"

"What's your name?" interrupted one of the guards.

Wanda whimpered out her chosen alias, "Drifting Clouds."

The first guard looked Wanda up and down, evaluating just what to do with the wayward Soul. Jared could see the man's staring leer as he appraised Wanda's body. He felt his fists tighten in anger but kept his emotions in check. He needed to be patient.

Keeping up her timid act, Wanda subtly inched closer to the group. "I-I got turned around. I didn't mean to stay out so late."

"Well now," said another guard as he came around behind Wanda. "What are we going to do with you?" He made a lewd gesture to his companion and both men laughed.

Their focus was entirely on her. It was as good as it was going to get. Jared stepped out of his hiding spot and walked swiftly towards the checkpoint. The security station was little more than a makeshift lean-to in the middle of the street. On either side of it were cement barricades with a generous helping of barbwire spooled across the barriers' tops. It made for an effective blockade against anyone trying to get into downtown Los Angeles.

Jared moved silently, but when he was within ten feet of the checkpoint and the men surrounding Wanda, he let out a yell. "There you are!"

They all gave a start at his sudden shout. Spinning around, the four guards swiftly raised their rifles. Jared came to a halt under the threat of the weapons, but he kept an irritated glare towards Wanda. "Drifting Clouds!" he scolded, "I told you not to wander off!"

Playing her part perfectly, Wanda began to cry. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry…I got lost…"
The first guard glanced at Jared, then to Wanda, and back to Jared. "She with you?" he asked with a scowl.

"Yeah, she is," stated Jared with a mock sigh.

A second guard questioned him, "And what's your name? You got identity papers for yourself and the worm?"

"Matt Stamons," replied Jared stiffly. He made a small motion with his hand towards his jacket pocket. "Mine lowering the guns?"

Three of the guards lowered their weapons. But the fourth man remained with his rifle drawn, watching him for any surprise moves. Jared then carefully pull the forged documents from his jacket. They had worked for him before, but this would be the first time the papers would be closely securitized. Jared made one quick, nervous, glance to Wanda. She was standing as still as a statue, with a few fresh tears on her face. Her eyes met his. Time to see if their whole crazy scheme was going to work.

Jared handed the IDs to the first guard. He was a big, well-built man and stood two inches taller than Jared. Chances were his body had been controlled by a Seeker not that long ago. Still scowling, the guard took the papers and began reading. The documents looked official. They had, in big bold letters, "Los Angeles Free Zone" written on the top. The remaining text was devoted to details on Jared's and Wanda's fake identities.

"Says here, Matt," announced the guard, "you were recovered six weeks ago when your worm voluntarily left your body." He glanced to Wanda, and added, "She did too, but it didn't take."

Looking ashamed, Wanda mumbled to the ground. "I tried to help like we're supposed to. But my body didn't recover." She said this while slowly inching her way closer to the security guard.

"Whatever," grumbled the man as he went back to looking over their papers.

One of the other guards, a shorter man with a crooked nose approached Jared. "You stayed with her?" He asked, indicating Wanda with a hike of his thumb. "Even after they couldn't bring the real person back?"

Jared swallowed back the urge to tell him Wanda was every bit a real person and should not be treated like this. But it would do them little good for him to get into a fight about Soul rights with these guards. Instead, he played on their earlier course behavior towards Wanda. Giving them a knowing smile, he said, "She's got her uses."

A short bark of laughter came from the crooked nosed man. "I bet she does."

The first guard pulled Jared's attention with another question. "Matt, do you work downtown or in the rest of the city?"

"Downtown," answered Jared. "Just got assigned yesterday to do some construction work."

He turned his attention to Wanda. "And you?"

Still staring at the ground, her response almost too soft to be heard. "I serve food at a Mexican restaurant."

Letting out an annoyed breath, Jared said, "Look, can we go? Drifting Clouds made an honest mistake. She has no sense of direction at all."
"It's true," offered Wanda with a meek smile. "When I was a Dragon I was always getting lost in the…"

The security guard then let out an impatient growl. "Oh for god's sake, just go!" He shoved the IDs back to Jared. In doing so, he brushed up against Wanda. Given the disproportion of their sizes, Wanda ended up stumbling to the ground while the guard barely noticed.

Acting quickly, Jared returned the documents to his jacket and bent down to help 'Drifting Clouds' to her feet. "Com'on," he said urgently, letting the guards' impatience act as a cover for Jared's real desire to get the hell out of there.

They rushed back down the street, away from the security station. Wanda took the lead, staying a few steps ahead of Jared. He shadowed behind her, letting his body act as a shield for her smaller form. Hopefully, out of sight would also mean out of mind and Wanda would be quickly forgotten by the sentries.

A block away they passed a connecting street and turned onto it. Jared and Wanda both slowed their rapid retreat to a leisurely pace. Jared scanned around, making sure they were not followed, or any one was paying them too much attention. When he was confident they were safe, we let out a long pent up breath.

"Are you okay?" he asked Wanda.

"I'm good," replied Wanda. She gave him a shy smile. "My heart was beating so hard I thought for sure they would hear."

Jared was almost afraid to ask if Wanda had been successful. They had taken a significant risk with the security station. There was the possibility Jared would be recognized from his previous time in Los Angeles. He knew the Humans of the Free Zone had lost many soldiers at the Battle of Topanga two months ago. How many of Craig Williams's original rebels had been killed was an unknown. But a chance encounter with someone like Wayne or Keith from LAX or, even worse, Madison or Joe would have ruined everything. Not that he was the only one at risk. LA could be very dangerous for a Soul who got on the wrong side of the Free Zone Security personnel.

"So…" began Jared.

"Got it!" answered Wanda with a grin. She opened her right hand, revealing the security badge she had swiped from the first guard when he had bumped into her. With a hint of boastfulness in her voice, she added, "palmed it just like you showed me. It was easy."

Jared had to shake his head at Wanda. She really was quite the rarity. A Soul who knew how to pickpocket someone. "You're honestly are getting good at acting," he told her. "Your little sob performance would convince anyone."

Wanda shrugged, and her smile faded a bit. "It's adapt or die. Isn't that the saying? I either had to lie convincingly, or I would be killed. So I lied well."

A twinge of guilt ran through Jared. It came for several reasons. A part of him felt like he was corrupting the innocent. Teaching Wanda to lie and steal with ease. Since she had gone "native" Wanda had been willing to protect her Human friends. Yet she had been so bad at lying and always felt very guilty about taking anything. And was successful only because her people were so trusting. But now, thanks to Jared's guidance, she was robbing Human security guards and was as duplicitous as any con man.
However, the larger source of his remorse came from the fact Wanda was forced to learn such skills. She needed them to survive. The Souls were no longer in control of the city. The "Los Angeles Free Zone" ruled LA with an iron fist and Wanda's people were reduced to a near slave status. They had been in the city for a little over two weeks. And Jared had lost count how many times he had seen the Souls cower in fear as their new masters took whatever they wanted. Humans were teaching the Souls just how ruthless and cruel they could be.

Wanda, always perceptive, picked up on his mood. "Don't blame yourself. You didn't want me to come with you. Remember? I was the one who insisted you needed my help."

"I didn't want a repeat of what happened at the airport," replied Jared. His face twisted with regret. "I'm here to rescue Melanie. Not try to save all those Souls held hostage in Cryotanks or try talk down a bunch of humans who have gone off the deep end."

They walked on in silence. A warm evening breeze pushed in from the ocean. There were a few people out tonight. Not as many as would normally be expected in a city the size of Los Angeles. The overhead street lamps giving enough light to make their eyes glow with a soft silver. It was still a strange thing for Jared. He no longer had to hide his identity from the Souls. As walked along, those who came close enough to realized he was a Human quickly scurried away.

After a while, Wanda murmured. "I know. You made that clear to me when we left Jeb's caves."

He felt another pang of guilt. "Doesn't that make me selfish? Just wanting to get Mel. Not trying to stop what's happening here?"

Wanda's lips pressed together as she considered Jared's question. After a minute she answered, "I suppose it does. But honestly, I don't know what else you could do."

Their destination lay ahead of them. Another checkpoint into downtown LA. But this one far busier than the last one. More people coming and going. There would be less scrutiny for Jared when he passed through.

"I'm not much better," continued Wanda as they slowed their approach to the security gate. "I also want Mel back." Weary dejection sagged on her shoulders. "And as much as I want to help, I don't know how to protect my people in the city. Or get the Humans here to listen."

"I guess we'll just have to settle on depriving Williams and his little cabal of Free Zoners from using Melanie," reflected Jared. "Who knows, it might actually hurt their ability to control the Soul population."

Wanda's gray eyes were distant. "Maybe," she conceded. She then shook her head and refocused her attention on the nearby security station. Turning the stolen security badge over in her hand she gave it to him and said, "You need to get going. They'll eventually notice the badge is gone. If they report it missing, we'll have to get another one."

"Right," muttered Jared as he scanned the line of people proceeding through the checkpoint. "Be ready with the Jeep," he instructed Wanda. "We may need to make a fast get away."

"I will," she replied with a nod.

As he started walking to the gate, he steeled himself for he would need to do. It would be the most dangerous part of their mission, and he would have to do it on his own. But this time he would not fail. After three long months, he would see Melanie again. Hold her again. Tonight he would rescue her.
Wanda voice came from behind him and only added to his conviction. "Go save my sister, Jared."

The automatic doors to Cedar City's convince mart slid open, and Sunny walked through the entrance. There was a gentle chime announcing her entry into the drugstore. She looked about, it was a small store. With several aisles containing food, home goods, and a collection of tourist supplies for exploring the nearby national parks. Crammed in the back of was a little pharmacy, stocking some medical supplies and general health items.

Nearby the checkout clerk turned from her station to give Sunny a bright smile and a polite greeting. "Welcome to our store," she said. "Can I help you with anything?" She wore a long blue apron with the store logo on its front.

"No, I'm all right," replied Sunny as she picked up a shopping basket from a stacked column of the plastic containers. "Just need to get a few supplies."

"Alright then," continued the clerk with her cheerful smile. "Let me know if you require anything."

Walking down the first aisle, a row of snack foods on one side and glass doors to refrigerators drinks on the others, Sunny considered what she should get. Those in the van would want something to eat and drink. Maybe something with caffeine. Everyone wanted to get back to Jeb's caves as soon as possible. Even if it meant driving late into the night.

She pulled several energy drinks from the refrigerated side of the aisle and placed them in her basket. Closing the door, she turned to look over the offering of snack foods. Bags of chips and cookies were on display. But Sunny noticed the shelves were bare in several spots. In some places there were only one or two items where there was easily room for much more. A brief examination of the other lanes showed similar empty spots on the shelves. The store was in need of being restocked.

"Sorry," said a gentle voice from behind her. Sunny turned around to see an older man standing behind her. His gray hair tufted out around the tops of his ears. The rest of his head was completely bald. He was also wearing an apron like the front checkout clerk.

"I saw you noticed our lack of goods. We haven't been getting as many supply runs lately." He said this with a wistful sadness. "I am sorry for the inconvenience."

"Oh, no, it's okay," replied Sunny. She smiled, hoping she could cheer up this morose Soul.

"I saw you noticed our lack of goods. We haven't been getting as many supply runs lately." He said this with a wistful sadness. "I am sorry for the inconvenience."

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"It's because of the Humans," continued the store clerk as if he had not heard her. "I've been listening to the reports. Supply trucks hijacked. Storage sites raided. The Humans greedily taking whatever they want."

Sunny easily noticed the touch of anger in the Soul's voice and tried not to wince. What was she doing but raiding right now? Taking food to three Humans covertly hiding in the nearby van.

"They're monsters…all of them," declared the clerk. He then shook his head, and it was hard to tell if he was trying to dispel some of his aggravated emotions or just giving into despair. "I'm sorry to…rant in front of you."

Again Sunny tried to smile politely, hoping to give some type of comfort to the man. She wanted to tell him not all Humans were monsters. That she was friends with some of them. That they were not
greedy, they were just trying to survive. That they too were upset by everything happening. But she
did not have the words. She was not sure there were any words. So she just stood there, smiling
awkwardly.

The clerk quickly turned away. Perhaps a little embarrassed by his outburst. Sunny continued
looking over different bags of junk food. Lost in thought. She did not know what to tell her people.
How to make them listen. Wanderer had tried and failed. If someone with all her experience and
wisdom could not succeed, what chances did Sunny have?

Her Human friends were not doing any better with their own kind. Three weeks ago Nate, Rob, and
Burns had made perilous trek eastward to learn more about the newly arisen Human Resistances
Army. It was dangerous for Burns to go, but they would have to pass through territory still
controlled by the Souls and they would need the silver in his eyes.

However, Nate had misjudged the speed of which the new army was spreading. The Human
Resistance were already carrying out raids into Iowa to capture valuable crops. These raiders had
been Seekers, and they knew all their tactics. Heavily armed and well trained, they cut through the
countryside unopposed. Nate's expedition, unfortunately, ran right into a group of these newly born
resistance fighters.

Nate had pleaded with them. Trying to explain that Burns was a friend who had risked protecting
Humans when the Souls were in complete control of the planet. But the soldiers did not care. They
wanted Burns Living Flowers little silver body removed from his host and destroyed. And their
angry demands soon turned to violence. Rob, Nate, and Burns narrowly escaped. With the latter
two gravely injured. That had prompted Sunny's journey north to deliver badly need medical
supplies.

Sunny let out a sigh. A weary and mournful sound. War and rage seemed the only thing anyone
wanted to listen to.

She was rummaging through a bin of apples when she heard it. The roar of an engine. Being
pushed harder than normal. Then the squeal of brakes. Someone stopping much too quickly.
Dangerous. Reckless.

Spinning around, Sunny caught sight through the front doors a large pickup truck coming to a stop.
Right in front of the store. It was filthy with splattered mud, banged up with peeling paint, and
dented rusted spots. One man got out the cab, a groan of protest coming the truck's door when he
opened it. Two others jumped from the back. She could not see their eyes, but there was little need.
Their dirty and disheveled outfits loudly announced none of them had access to a clothing store.
The fact each one of them carried a long barrel shotgun only underscored their identity.

"HUMANS!" quaked the checkout clerk from the front of the store.

A wash of panic ran through Sunny. 'No! No! Not here! Not now!'

The automatic doors obediently opened, and the gentle chime went off as three Humans strode into
the store. A thunderous boom rattled around the shop as the lead man fire his shotgun into the air.
A circular section of the ceiling disintegrated. Bits of wood and plaster rained down.

"Everyone on the ground!" screamed the one who fired.

Sunny dropped to the floor. Her whole body shaking in fear.

'Calm down. Breathe,' came the familiar voice from the back of her mind.
And Sunny did. Flattened on the floor, she closed her eyes and steadied her breathing. One breath in. One breath out. Then a little shudder went through her body. A small twitch of her facial muscles. Opening her eyes, she slowly stood up and surveyed the approaching gunmen.

The first gunman saw Jodi stand up and instantly strode towards her. He was maybe in his early twenties guessed Jodi. It was a little hard to tell, with his scraggly beard and long dark hair. His torn jean overalls were faded with age and use. He looked like a wild mountain man.

His shotgun was shoved into Jodi's face, and he bellowed, "I said on the ground, worm!"

"Whoa! Hold on!" yelled Jodi as she put her hands up. "I'm on your side!"

She angled her face up towards the store's ceiling so the florescent lights would show the lack of silver in her eyes. At least she hoped so. Jodi still worried that one of these little switcheroos she pulled off with Sunny would one day go wrong. And Jodi would end up with silver ringed eyes or Sunny would get her normal dark brown ones.

But not this time. Scraggly beard man stopped, stunned as he saw Jodi's regular Human eyes. The suntanned skin of his forehead creased in confusion. "What the hell?"

The gun barrel was still just inches from her nose. In a little softer voice from her first shout, Jodi said, "Would you mind getting that thing out of my face? I'm not a big fan of guns."

"She's human?" questioned one of the other gunmen. With Jodi entirely focused on the first man who had done all the shooting and the screaming, she had not noticed the other man come up behind her. Like the first, he had coal black hair and an unkempt beard.

He laid a big meaty hand on her narrow shoulder. Jodi could feel a rise of alarm in Sunny. 'I don't think he believe us.'

'No,' urged Jodi. 'Just give me a minute. We can handle these guys, just like we did in Montana.'

"Get your paws off me," snapped Jodi as she refocused her attention away from internal conversations and pushed his hand away.

"Yeah," said the first man, still more than a little surprised, "She's Human alright." The shotgun barrel finally moved away from her head. But his bewilderment over her presence did not. "What are you doing here?"

"Same reason you're here, I suspect," replied Jodi coolly. "This store is right off the highway, easy access in and out. Small enough to not have a big staff or too many customers. Perfect place to get supplies."

A snort of laughter came from the third man. He had just a touch of gray in his messy hair, making him older than the other two. He was already grabbing food items from the shelves and stuffing them into an open sack. Without looking up from his thievery, he remarked, "That's the same thing you said, Tye. Sounds like she was beating us to the punch."

Apparently, scraggly beard man was named Tye, and his confusion was only growing. His frown turned to a near scowl at Jodi. "You were robbing them?" and he made a quick wave of his weapon towards the two Souls cowering on the floor. "But you don't have a gun."
Glancing at the Souls, Jodi saw the bald-headed one was staring up at her in utter astonishment. There was no way for her to communicate with him, but she willed with every bit of her being that he would keep his mouth shut. She turned back to Tye.

"I don't need one," she explained. Tye's gun was still too close for comfort. So, she made a small motion with her hand towards her pants pocket, indicating she want to pull something out without him freaking out.

"See, I just wear these," she said as she pulled out the small contact case.

Jodi was finally thankful Scott had talked her into carrying a set. Her unique ability with Sunny meant they had no need of the silver shaded contacts. But Scott had pointed out that if someone saw them do their change, it would raise a lot of questions. Carrying the contacts could provide a much more mundane explanation than the bizarre truth.

Tye took the case from her and studied the thin plastic lenses. "And this works? The worms think you're one of them?"

"If you're meek, super polite, and keep a big, dumb smile on your face, they aren't going to suspect anything and then they don't look too close."

"Huh," muttered Tye. He shook his head as if he was trying to dislodge his bafflement. Seemingly still a bit suspicious of her story. But he reached some type of decision and lead Jodi away from the Souls. His voice lowered to whisper. "My name is Tye Beckworth." He made a small nod of his head towards the other two men who were busy pulling bags of chips, bread, and every other type of food into waiting sacks. "And that's my brother Jasper and my Uncle Samuel."

"Jodi," said Jodi without any other further identification.

"Is it just you?"

There was no way her little crew in the van had not seen and heard these three idiots come roaring into the store. Jodi knew they would not leave without her and were likely already plotting rescue. She needed to be ready to get out of here quickly. Tye and his merry little band would be drawing far too much attention.

Spinning her deception, Jodi said, "It's just me. I keep on the move. I never stay in one place too long."

Tye looked her up and down, still a little uncertain. "You wouldn't need to anymore. You can come with us. We've got room."

That was the last thing Jodi wanted to do. She needed to play along very carefully.

Sunny put in, 'I think they must be from the nearby mountains. That truck of theirs would never make it far before someone reported it.'

'Good point,' replied Jodi. 'That also means they've survived up there for a long time. Likely very isolated. Why did they come down now?'

'It can't just be for food,' reasoned Sunny. 'Something must be forcing them to take these risks.'

Sunny's speculation was confirmed when Tye asked, "Do you know much about their medicine?"

"Some," admitted Jodi, wondering what he was really after.
Tye walked to the back of the store where a small counter stood, and several rows of white cabinets were mounted behind it. Jodi cautiously followed him. There were signs on each of the cupboards' doors for medicines of HEAL, INSIDE & OUTSIDE CLEAN, SMOOTH, COOL. Trying one of the cabinets, Tye revealed its door to be locked tight.

That was new thought, Jodi. Usually the Souls would not secure anything. But she remembered how baldy had complained to Sunny about the increase in Human raids. He must of have locked up the medicine, worried about this store being pillaged. Just like it was now.

Tye must have come to the same conclusion, for he crossed back to the where the Soul lay flat on the ground. "Get up," he commanded.

Very slowly the Soul rose to his feet. He was trembling. Tye shoved his shotgun in his face and growled, "You're going to open those cabinets and show me how to use that medicine or swear I will rip your little worm body out."

Sunny nearly burst to the surface to retake control, worried and more than a little outraged over the threat to one of her kind. But Jodi hung on and pressed the Soul within her. 'Hold on. I will handle this.'

"Stop it," said Jodi out loud. Marching over, she put herself between Tye and the Soul. "Stop waving that damn gun around. Can't you tell he's terrified?"

Tye's face screwed up into a mix of incredulity and frustration. "I don't care!" He narrowed his eyes at her. "Why the hell do you care?"

"Look," shot back Jodi. "You obviously need some of their Medicine." Pointing at the Soul, she added, "And he knows where the key is. Now, you can stand there screaming at him, pointing your gun at him and threatening him until he kills himself. Then you'll have to find the key on your own. Or, you could just try talking to him."

Tye turned to glare at the shopkeeper and scoffed. "Why would he willing help me?" Jodi saw sweat was trickling down the Soul's smooth head. His silver ringed eyes fretfully flicked from Tye to Jodi. He did not seem to know what to make of the two Humans arguing over him.

Trying to calm the situation Jodi asked softly, "Who's hurt?"

Some of the anger in Tye's face was replaced with a sullen look of worry. "It's my kid sister, Lucy. She's real sick."

"Okay," said Jodi, feeling like she was making some type of progress. Lately she and Sunny had plenty of experience playing nursemaid. She knew what to do. "What's her symptoms?"

"High fever. A bad cough. Like some type of infection. Samuel thinks it might be numeral… or umm… numina…" He struggled for the right word.

"Pneumonia," confirmed Samuel as he dragged the bag now full of food towards the store's front automatic doors. Before he disappeared outside, he added, "Pick up the pace Tye. We need to be moving."

"So that would be INSIDE HEAL, COOL, and you'll need some HEALTH too," said Jodi. She gave the bald-headed Soul a soft smile. Just like Sunny would. "Can you unlock the cabinets and get him the needed medicine?" she asked gently.

The Soul stared at her for a lengthy amount of time. Long enough to make Jodi worry Tye would
lose what little patience he had left. "You..." began the Soul. He nervously glanced at Tye and his brother and then settled back to Jodi. "Who are...you?"

Jodi ignored his question. "Listen, I don't have time for this. The faster you give him the medicine, the sooner we all leave."

The Soul shook his head. In a shaky voice, he replied, "He could take his sibling to a healing center. They would treat..."

"Do you think I'm stupid!?" thundered Tye as he cut him off. Tye jabbed his shotgun into Soul's stomach, knocking him to the ground. "I know what you things do there! My mom and dad went to the hospital, and then they became just like you! I'll kill Lucy before I let you monsters do that to her!" His breath started coming out in excited pants. "I've watched as you've done it to everybody I know! But I've been listening to the radio, the world is changing. You worms are getting your asses kicked out east. You better pray, to whatever you things believe in, that when that army pulls into town, they don't just burn you ALL!"

Everything went silent in the store as Tye's rant came to an end. The only sound was his chest puffing in and out in an exhausted rage. Then the chime to front door went off. It was loud enough to make everyone jump. Soon more noises came from the front of the store. Angry words were being traded between Jasper and a new voice.

Furrowed confusion and worry bloomed on Tye's face. He pulled his shotgun away from the quaking Soul and hurried down the aisle. "Jasper," he yelled, "what's going on?"

As he passed between the rows of groceries, Kyle seemingly stepped out of nowhere and brought his pistol up and pointed it directly at Tye's head. "Drop the gun, asshole," he commanded.

In Jodi's judgment, Kyle had moved like a ninja. She had not seen or heard him until he appeared. But she had overheard Aaron's voice arguing with Jasper up front and knew her friends were making their move. Tye's hands holding his shotgun twitched nervously, but Kyle's were like ridged steel. The barrel of his gun never wavered so much as a millimeter from the other man's head, and Kyle's finger rested firmly on the trigger. He repeated his order, and Tye let his gun clatter to the floor. A few moments later she saw Brandt brandishing his own weapon at Samuel's back as he forced the older man down the aisle.

"Is that everyone?" demanded Kyle as Aaron brought Jasper from a different row. Both he and Brandt nodded as they kept a careful watch on their new prisoners. Jodi confirmed it as well with a deep sigh and a nod of her head.

Without looking directly at her, Kyle asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm all right," Jodi managed to say without letting her voice crack.

'I'm okay too,' offered Sunny. After the constant threat of Tye and his shotgun, the Soul very much wanted Kyle to hold her.

That brought a tired groan out of Jodi. The three of them were still working out their screwball relationship. 'I think Kyle was asking for the both of us, Sunny.'

Tye's angry words brought Jodi out of her internal dialog with her other half. He glared accusingly at her. "I thought you said you were alone!"

Jodi shrugged and said, "I lied."
Jared slowly maneuvered past the waist high cement pylons making up the outer line of the Figueroa Street security station. The checkpoint spanned the entire broad avenue. It acted as one of the main gateways into the center of Los Angeles, the station was heavily traveled. As Jared approached, he figured at least sixty people waited in line to pass through. He knew were faster ways into the downtown, but they would have securitized his fraudulent paperwork. Here, where the guards of the Los Angeles Free Zone were too busy to look for forgeries was his best choice.

Unlike the smaller security station where he and Wanda had stolen the guard's security card, this checkpoint was well staffed. More than twenty arm guards stood ready to repel any advance by the Souls. Not that it was necessary at this point, the show of force. The Souls in the surrounding area had acquiesced to Human control.

While he waited in line, Jared thought back to what he had heard the first time he had come through this checkpoint. Apparently, in the beginning, there had been a good deal of resistance. Even the ever gentle Souls would not simply roll over and accept the new conquerors of LA. While individually weak, in large numbers the Souls could be very powerful. They had formed a massive mob and marched on the Humans. But it was not guns or bullets that had stopped the alien horde from breaking down the barriers Jared was now walking through. Merely several barrels of gasoline and the emptied out contents of cryotanks. Humans had burnt hundreds of the little silver creatures in front of their horrified kin and then promised if the Souls did not immediately disperse, they would burn a thousand more.

At best, Jared guessed there only a few thousand Humans in the city. Yet they wielded near-absolute power over the far more populous Souls. Humanity had turned the aliens' own altruistic nature against itself. Somewhere in the downtown area tens of thousands of cryotanks were held hostage. Used to keep the generally timid creatures in line. For a Soul would do almost anything to protect another. Even be reduced to becoming a slave. This was the key to the Los Angeles Free Zone's power.

"Hey Chico, your papers," said a bored voice from in front of him, and Jared pulled himself away from his disturbing thoughts. The line of people waiting to go through the checkpoint had inched along until it was now his turn. Jared looked up at the guard who had spoken. She was maybe in her late forties with skin that had been exposed to the harsh sun far too often. The accent in her voice and her dark hair and skin gave her a distinct Hispanic origin. She stood coolly before him, but there was an edge of danger to her. As if shaking your hand would be the same to her as gutting you with a knife.

Jared had a feeling she was from one of drug cartel bands that had managed to hide out in the desolate wastelands just south of the border. They had been persistent rumors of flare-ups of violence against the Souls in random spots around Sonora. The once infamous violent drug runners appeared to rebuild themselves. It was only natural, thought Jared sourly, they had a new market to exploit – LA. He realized he was gawking at the woman and quickly looked away. Luckily she seemed to be barely paying attention to him.

"Yep," he attempted to answer casually. Pulling out the 'Matt Stamons' ID, Jared handed it to the guard. She glanced quickly at it and then to Jared. She nodded once, but before she handed it back, she thrust a flashlight into his face. He jerked away, blinking rapidly from the wash out of after images from being blinded.

When it came right down to it, the checking of his eyes was the only real test he needed to pass for entry. No Soul was allowed into Downtown Los Angeles. From Echo Park to the north, boarded on
the east by the Los Angeles River, and then nearly to Washington Boulevard in the south, the center of the vast Los Angeles metropolitan city belonged exclusively to humanity.

"Hey," mutter the guard as she handed Jared's paperwork back to him. "Needed to be sure, you know?"

Jared shrugged. Trying not to make too much of her inspecting his eyes. He did not need to stand out in any way. Only to pass through the gate and be forgotten in the crowd.

"Alright," she said after giving a wave to the other guards to let Jared pass. "Get going."

Walking through the gate, Jared entered a place that up until three months ago seemed like a complete impossibility – a human city. It was not that there such a radical difference from crossing the barrier which separated the Soul side of the from the Human. Same buildings, roads, cars, people walking on the sidewalk, all the things you would normally find in a city.

Yet the subtle differences were there. As Jared walked down the street, he heard music playing, but not the soft, drowsy songs the Souls enjoyed. Hard Rock and Roll filter out of an open third-story window of some nearby apartments. Loud shouts came from a bar across the street. And down the hill, at the next intersection, several car horns bleated as traffic lumbered along.

Now that he successfully passed the security checkpoint, Jared made a quick glance at the time. He needed to pick up his pace. He had to be at the Ritz-Carlton at precisely 7:00 PM. The next hurdle in his rescue of Melanie. And it would be the most dangerous one.

He had spent the last week meticulously scoping out the hotel and everyone who came and went. Many of the Los Angeles Free Zone leaders lived and worked out of the hotel. Including Melanie. She was the esteemed Minister of Soul Affairs. Charged with the essential responsibility of maintaining the official Free Zone's policy of 'Peace and Stability through Obedience and Sacrifice' for the Souls. Or, as Jared could easily read between those lines – 'Do as we say, or we'll toss you out of the city, and you can fall victim to a roving band of wild Humans.'

The strange thing was, some Souls were beginning to buy into this propaganda. After seeing the destruction of cities around the world by their own ships turned into weapons. Or watching an army of former Seekers blow up a cryotank storage site in Detroit. It was evident for all to see the Souls' control on the world was slipping. In all this chaos, they were turning to anyone who promised them safety. And Melanie Stryder was the calm voice offering assurances if the Souls worked for the LA Free Zone, they would be protected. For the Human in this city had learned how to live in harmony with the Souls. That together they would build a better world.

Jared had seen Melanie say as much in a speech she gave at a busy shopping mall a few days ago. Concealed in the crowd, he and Wanda had watched her speak, utterly horrified. Dressed in brand new flashy fashionable clothes, Melanie had stood on a stage, wearing a big fake smile on her face while delivering her message. She had told the gathered Souls she knew there had been much anger and hatred by the Humans, but there was a way forward for both races. That the Souls merely needed to find their place in the new order. Of all the painful sights he had seen since his return to Los Angeles, watching his Mel give that speech was the hardest.

She had to be under Craig Williams's control. There was no other explanation. Everywhere Melanie went, she was guarded. Her every public appearance tightly regulated. But Jared had learned the constant veil of security had one exception. Inside her penthouse suite in the Ritz-Carlton. She resided there alone, and rarely took visitors. And there lay his opportunity at her rescue.
Jogging across the street, Jared made a turn onto Olympic Boulevard, and the smooth glass exterior of the hotel fell into view. One more check on his watch told him he would be cutting it close. But he did not want to appear hurried or be out of breath. He needed to look like he belonged there.

At 6:52 PM Jared crossed the threshold of the outer doors of the Ritz-Carlton and entered the hotel's lobby. He had been here before. The nearly three-story glass entrance opened into an enormous space, filled with lush carpets, marble floors, endless rows of comfortable chairs. White granite support columns rose into the high ceiling above. This was his fifth time here, and he was still staggered by the sheer elegance and opulence of the building.

And the lobby was busy. With the luxury hotel providing the residence for many of the influential leaders running the Los Angeles Free Zone, it drew more than its share of individuals. Like the royal court of some king or queen, there were bystanders, visitors, security, and the whole gamut of support staff. It was easy to be lost in this crowd.

Boisterous laughter came from a small knot of people. Jared did not recognize any of them. He knew that in the last two months many people in the city had been brought back when Souls 'voluntarily' gave up their host bodies. Or they might be from outside the city, survivors not unlike Jared himself. Drawn in by the promise of power and a chance to revisit retribution on the Souls.

He did not have time to speculate. Keeping a low profile, Jared headed past the crowded hall. Off to a side, partly hidden by one of the larger support columns, lay an unremarkable door. Attached to the wall next to the door, was a black plastic card reader. He took out the security badge Wanda had stolen and ran it through the reader. A long pause followed, and Jared held his breath. If the card did not work, his rescue mission would be over before it even started. It felt like an hour passed, but it was only just a few seconds when a low buzz came from the door, and then came the sound of the electronic lock disengaging. Quickly opening the door, Jared was through in a heartbeat. Compared to the outside lobby, he traveled through a much plainer hallway. At the end were a single door and one guard. Unlike the those who worked at the security stations, he was not dressed in combat armor or carried an imposing rifle. His uniform was not unlike a Seeker's. A neatly pressed navy blue blazer and black dress pants. The clear plastic of security headset looped around his right ear.

"You here for the security meeting?" questioned the guard as Jared came to a stop before him.

"Yeah," replied Jared with a single nod. He handed over both his fake ID and the security card. The man briefly examined both and then spoke into the microphone clipped to his jacket. "I've got a Matt Stamons here for the security meeting." He listened to the inaudible response in his earbud as Jared fought to keep from sweating. He needed to project a calm and slightly impatient expression on his face.

"Matt," said the guard, "You're not on the list."

"I was a last minute add," replied Jared as casually as he could manage. "Marco told me to come here."

The guard made a small sigh, but his cold expression was replaced with a slight smirk. "Yeah, that sounds like Marco." He returned Jared his papers and stolen security badge. "Alright, Matt," continued the guard as he opened the door, "Down the hallway, take a turn to the left and the meeting room will be on the second door on the right. Keep that security badge with you."

"Thanks," said Jared as he passed through the door. It promptly closed behind him, and Jared checked his watch. It was 7:03 PM, he needed to keep moving. Quickly walking down the hallway,
Jared was thankful he had overheard two Free Zone guards talking about someone named Marco and his tendency to play fast and loose with the rules. It was just what he needed to help scam his way past that guard.

The pathway Jared walked down ended in an intersection with another hallway. To the left would be the meeting for the new security personnel interviewing for positions for work at the hotel. To the right would be the hotel's kitchen. Jared went to the right.

The noise from kitchen reached Jared's ears just before the scent of cooking food found his nose. A whole verity of aromas tickled his senses. The sizzle of cooking meat, fresh baked bread, the continual jostling of pots and pans. Pushing through swinging doors led him into a room filled with people rushing about as they prepared meals for hotel's many guests.

It was terribly easy to get lost in this bustle of activity. Jared waded his way past several men dressed in dirty aprons who paid him little attention. Jared shifted back and forth, looking for his target. The guy had to be here. Mel always took her dinner at 7:15 sharp. He had almost done a full lap around the kitchen when Jared spotted him – a tall man a few years older than Jared in a bellhop's uniform. Dark brown pants and a jacket with bronze buttons running down its length. The collar and the sleeves of the jacket embroidered with a golden red trim. The outfit was completed by one of those silly little round hats. He was leaning against one wall, keeping out of the way.

Stepping up to the man, Jared almost had to shout over all the continual racket of the cooks completing the latest set of orders. "Hey," said Jared, "can you help me with something."

"Uh," said the bellhop as he gave Jared a slightly confused frown, "I've got to take a meal up to the sixteenth floor."

"It will only take a second."

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"It will only take a second."

The bellhop gaze wandered around the kitchen, looking for a possible out. He did not find one. "Fine, just make it quick."

"Sure," replied Jared as he led the man out of the chaos of food preparation. They traveled only a short distance, to one of the supply storerooms for the kitchen. Opening the door lead Jared and his bellhop into a tight space filled with rows of institutional sized cans of fruits and vegetables.

"I can't get this uniform dirty, they make a big deal about that," explained the bellhop.

"Right," muttered Jared. He walked in and made his way to the back of the storeroom.

"You know it's funny," continued the bellhop as he followed Jared. "I worked at this place for years before the Souls came and had to wear this getup. Then when they shoved one those things in my neck, it continued to work at the hotel. And now that it's gone, I'm still doing the same thing, still wearing the same uniform." Drawing to a stop before Jared, he asked, "Isn't that kind of sad?"

"It is," agreed Jared, and shoved the little bottle of SLEEP he had been carrying into the bellhop's face. The man did not even get a chance to react before the silver mist engulfed his head. His eyes rolled back, and Jared caught him before he hit the ground. Mumbling out an apology, Jared started shucking off the bellhop's uniform. Every second was counting against him, and he rushed to swap his clothes for the bellhops. The jacket turned out to be a little tight in the shoulders, but he would manage.

Letting out a shaky sigh, Jared started for the door when he remembered something. A quick check on the floor revealed the missing item, the stupid little bellhop hat. It had a thin elastic strap which
held the too small cap to his head. He felt ridiculous wearing it. But he needed to blend in, and the hat was part of the outfit.

He locked the pantry door as he left. Hopefully, his sleeping bellhop would not be discovered anytime soon. Then back to the busy kitchen with just a minute to spare. As wait staff bustled completed orders out the door, one of the cooks shouted out – "Order for room 1610." That was Melanie's apartment.

"I've got it," said Jared as approached the row of hot steaming plates of food. Mel's chosen dinner was pork chops, green beans, and a baked potato. Just one plate, easy enough to carry. But Jared sought out one of the kitchen's dinner carts. The push cart was big and fancy, with plenty of space to hold six full meals on top and an empty locker underneath with room for even more food. A lien tablecloth covered almost the entire dolly. It was just what he needed.

No one stopped him. Everyone was busy, and Jared was dressed for the part. He pushed the cart out of the kitchen and headed for the hotel's elevators. To access the elevator to the hotel's penthouses, he would again need the security badge. With his heart in his throat, Jared ran it past the scanner. He was close now. A nervous tension was rapidly building in his body.

A small green light flicked on by the badge reader and a moment later an elevator door open. Jared rode up in silence to the sixteen floor. He had to fight down an urge to fidget. Normally he was always cool-headed and calm when on a raid. But this different. He was not stealing food or supplies from the Souls.

The elevator's doors opened, and Jared found himself staring out into an utterly ordinary and unremarkable hotel hallway. The only thing which stood out were the two men standing on either side of the corridor. They wore the same dark blue blazers as the guard Jared had encountered on the first floor.

Pushing the dinner cart out of the elevator, Jared only went a few steps in before the guards stopped him. They checked the plate of food and trolley, but it was only a cursory examination. He was deep enough in they ultimately assumed he was supposed to be there. They let him through, and Jared headed to room 1610.

At the door to the apartment, one the guards called to him. "Hey!"

Jared froze. He glanced at the man who had spoken. The shoulders of his jacket were overly broad. His face looked just a few years older than Jamie's.

Managing to keep voice even, Jared replied, "Yes?"

"You new here?"

Something like a ball of ice settled in Jared's stomach. "Yep, just started today."

"Huh," said guard. A smile broke on his young face. "Me too."

The ice melted in the pit of Jared's gut and he returned the smile. "Well good luck to you," he said and opened the door. Entering Mel's apartment, Jared found himself in a short hallway which opened into a roomy foyer. Past the entrance to the right was a dining room with a large oval table surrounded by empty chairs. The table's dark wooden surface was completely untouched and unused. Everything inch of place flaunted luxury and extravagance. Marble floors, embroidered paneling covered the walls and plush carpets.

"I'm in the living room, bring the food in here," came a voice from further into the apartment. It
was Melanie's voice.

Wheeling the cart down the hallway brought Jared into the living room. He had to suppress a gasp, for the place had an incredible view. Floor to ceiling windows overlooked a striking vista of the city Los Angeles in all its glory. Stretching all the way out to the mountains in the far distance. And the living room was huge. As big as his entire old cabin. Melanie might be a captive here, yet she was surrounded by the most comfortable extravagance. Jared reminded himself that even a gilded cage was still a cage.

She was sitting on the couch, with her back to him. A pile of papers surrounded her, and she seemed to be intensely studying them. Completely ignoring the beautiful panorama offered by her corner penthouse suite.

"Mel," breathed Jared.

She turned around, and for a moment she looked at him blankly, as if she did not recognize him. But it lasted for just one moment. Then her eyes lit up, and her mouth opened and closed. She swallowed and tried again.

"Jared," she whispered.

"I'm here, baby."

Then she was jumping up and running to him faster than she had ever moved. He caught her in his arms and pulled her to him so tightly he thought he might break her. But she was strong and warm against him. And her grasp was just as firm as his. Their mouths found each and their kiss was all fire and inferno.

He was unsure just how long they want on like this. He did not ever want to let go. Nor did Melanie, her hands seemed to everywhere. Through his hair, touching his face, his chest, all over, like she was convincing herself he was real.

Eventually, her lips left his, and she had questions as soon as she could manage to catch her breath. "How?"

"Got some fake IDs, stole a security badge, knocked out a bellhop and took his uniform." He grinned at her, "You know, the usual stuff."

She paused, and he could see she was working things out in her mind. "All the new security personnel. All the training…" she drifted off as she continued to ponder his break in.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "I figured with all the new faces around here, and everyone still finding the order of things, this would be the best time to rescue you."

Melanie blinked, and a frown edged its way onto her lips. "Rescue?"

He slipped his arm down to her waist and turned her to face the dinner cart. He pulled up the tablecloth covering the trolley and revealed the open region hidden by the cloth cover. "It's not a lot of room, but if you curl up and hold still, I can wheel you right past the guards outside."

Her frown grew bigger. "But, Jared."

"I know, it's not going to be easy. But I've got a route to the outside through the kitchen. Once we get outside the only real problem left will be security gates. We might need to lay low for a little bit."
Melanie was shaking her head. "No. Wait. You came here to...take me away?"

Now Jared felt confused. Like he had missed part of the conversation. "Umm...yeah," he said slowly. "I'm here to rescue you, Mel. I tried back at LAX before Williams launched his spaceship-bombs. But things didn't work out."

Melanie nodded to herself. "I thought...well, I heard things. I believed it might have been you and Kyle back at the airport."

"It was, but things got complicated. I would have been back sooner." He could spend hours explaining everything that had happened in the past three months. The return of Jodi and the strange dual existence between her and Sunny. Kyle nearly dying. Wanda's and Ian's narrow escape for Chicago and the handful of refugees they brought to Jeb's caves from that wrecked city.

"A lot happened, Mel. But we don't have time to talk about it. We need to go."

But then the most painful, heartbreaking, expression flashed on to Melanie's face. "Jared," she whispered, "I can't leave."

"We need to get moving, fast," instructed Kyle. His gun was still trained on their three captives, but he had relaxed his stance, and his finger was no longer on the trigger. He continued to eye them warily as he added, "No telling how many Souls saw and heard that pile of junk out front pull up."

"Hey!" complained Tye sourly as he shot Kyle a dirty look. "That's my truck. It's been through a lot. Not like I can exactly put it in with a mechanic. And who cares how many of the worms see it?"

Kyle roughly sighed, which came out much more like an annoyed snort. "What is this, amateur hour? Do you idiots know how to carry out a raid without drawing the attention of every Seeker for fifty miles?"

Jasper was quick to his brother's defense. "Haven't you heard? The Seekers aren't here anymore. They've all been called out east to fight our army." He looked to the baldheaded Soul, and a predatory grin spread across his face. "We'll be heading out that way to join up with the resistance as soon as we get enough supplies. But eventually, we'll make our way back here."

The shopkeeper paled but said nothing to Jasper's taunt.

"Boy, keep your mouth shut," instructed Samuel. The older man was glaring daggers at Kyle and his companions. "I don't know who the hell you think you are, but we're just doing the same as you. Taking what we need to survive. Why are pointing guns at us? We're all human." He jutted his chin towards the Souls. "They're the enemy!"

With an exasperated shake of his head, Kyle put his pistol back into the holster on his hip. Aaron and Brandt continued to cover the three men. "Look," said Kyle harshly, "You three are obviously new to this. So, whether there are Seekers currently around, screaming in here with your redneck mobile and shooting up the place is a fantastic way to get some here in a hell of a hurry. What were you thinking?"

Jodi found herself answering for Tye and his family. "They've got a sick sister back home. I guess they figured if they came in here and acted aggressively, they could get whatever they needed"
from the Souls." She gave Tye a sympathetic smile. "They just didn't count on us being here."

Kyle gazed at her and then back to their captives. He let out another sigh, this one empty of anger, just full of weariness. "Alright, we'll get you the medicine. Then we're all getting the hell out of here. Got it?"

Tye's expression was hard to read, but Jasper and Samuel were incredulous. "Oh, how kind of you!" mouthed off Samuel. "After pulling guns on us and telling us how we're supposed to behave when we're trying to save one of our own!"

Then Jasper sneered at Jodi, "And you act like you care more about these worms than your own kind!"

A rising anger started in Jodi's body. "What do you want to do here!?" she snapped at the two men. "Stay here and fight with the Souls or us, or go back to your home and save Lucy?"

Her annoyed irritation was not just from herself, but also from Sunny. The Soul's normal polite patience had run out. 'They are very stubborn and foolish,' announced Sunny. Once again their interwoven emotions were tied so close it was impossible for them to tell who first had gotten angry.

"She's right," said Tye to his brother. "We came here to help Lucy, not get into a brawl with other survivors." He nodded towards the back where the store's medical supplies were held. "The medicine is locked up in the back. We can probably shoot the cases open."

"And likely destroy the stuff in the process," retorted Aaron in an annoyed tone that matched Kyle's. "You guys really are amateurs."

"Okay, fine," growled Tye as glared at the cowering Soul. "Anyone have some suggestions on how to get the worms to give up the keys?"

Jodi moved until she was standing next to Kyle. He had lost weight over the last few months. His clothes hung a little loose on his frame. But he had mostly recovered from being shot and his life-threatening injury. Despite that, he still towered over her. Always her gallant knight of a protector.

He tilted his head down so she could whisper in his ear. "Let me and Sunny try talking to the Souls."

"Alright, but make it quick. We're too exposed here. It doesn't matter if the Seekers are gone or not. If enough Souls get together, they'll be too big of a problem for any of us to handle." Kyle put an emphasis on the word 'any.' Even Sunny would have limits on trying to talk down a mob of her people if they realized what was happening in this little store.

Kyle, Aaron, and Brandt swiftly herded Tye, Jasper, and Samuel out the front door. In an effort of some conciliation, Kyle and Aaron helped Tye and Jasper load up some of their plundered supplies into Tye's truck. Brandt cautiously remained watchful over the group in case any of their new-found friends got any ideas about some payback for Kyle's intervention.

Seeing as the men out front were busy with both loading up their supplies and keeping an eye on each other, Jodi turned her attention back to the two Soul clerks. The woman was huddled on the floor. Even though she had been largely ignored by everyone, she was rocking back and forth with tears streaming down her face. She was terrified out of her mind. It was best for Jodi to keep her distance. Instead, she turned her attention back to the bald one. He was standing, still eying her warily, but at least he was coherent enough to talk.
Trying again with a friendly smile, she said, "Hi, I'm sorry about all this. My name's Jodi. What's yours?"

He nodded once to himself and then slowly answered. "Rock Keeper."

"Well Rock Keeper, as I was saying before, if you could open those medicine cabinets we'll get out of here and leave you alone."

Rock Keeper once again gave Jodi a long look up and down. Hesitantly, he said, "You weren't wearing contacts, Jodi. I saw your eyes. They…changed when you were on the floor. How?"

'Ah, nuts,' thought Jodi. 'Guess we weren't as subtle as we hoped we were.' Glancing between Rock Keeper and the other Soul who was still cowering on the ground, Jodi considered their options. 'I think you need to handle this Sunny.'

'Agreed,' replied Sunny.

Jodi closed her eyes and relaxed the muscles from her shoulders and then down her back. She felt herself receding, falling into the background of their shared body. At the same time, Sunny pushed forward, rising to the surface. It was their own little private do-si-do as the twin minds spun around each other.

Doc and Candy had nearly exhausted themselves trying to make sense out of how Jodi and Sunny could pull off this change. Neither could make sense if the process was biological, some type of mental state, or something else even stranger. Both doctors could only speculate on how the mysterious CURE drugged had affected them, or what had happened to both Human and Soul while they were held captive by the Vulture Asag.

It had started on that terrible day when Jeremy, in a fit of panicked rage, had raised his gun and fired. Kyle had jumped in the way and taken the bullet meant for her. Jodi and Sunny had screamed out his name as one. Their minds, bizarrely mixed together since Sunny had woken up, became unified on the single overriding thought of saving Kyle. The struggle to carry him back to the Jeep. Trying to stem the bleeding as Jared, with surprisingly steady hands, worked to pluck the bullet out of Kyle's back with his knife. They had use every bit of CURE and SEAL they had to patch wound, managing to fix the worst of the injury. But Kyle had lost a lot of blood...so much blood. Then their desperate race to the safety of Jeb's caves. Kyle had only the faintest of heartbeats when they rushed him to the hospital. Doc and Candy had worked tirelessly as they fought to save Kyle's life. Through all of it, for every moment, Jodi was by Kyle's side, and Sunny was at hers. In every thought and in every motion. Both Human and Soul entwined.

After the danger had passed and Kyle began his slow recovery, Jodi and Sunny found their entangled minds were now not so easy to separate. They were still two distinct consciousness in one body, but their thoughts ran together, and their emotions seemed to be entirely in sync. They had been sitting with Kyle as he slept on a hospital cot, contemplating their new shared status when he had woken up. They had been overjoyed. Weak and blurry eyed, Kyle had mumbled out Sunny's name several times before drifting off again. At first, they had thought he had said the wrong name in his fevered confusion. It was only when they saw the silvered patterns on the far cave wall reflected off their eyes from an errant shaft of sunlight did they understand. Without realizing it, Sunny had regained the use of Jodi's body. In a shocked surprise, Sunny had jumped up, only to have Jodi stumble over as the Soul's control slipped.

It was like learning to walk. They found the key to their unique ability came not from forcing one mind down while the other dominated, but from cooperation. Taking practice and focus on both their parts to make their dual control work. It was still easier for Jodi to remain on top and the one
running the show. But now, nearly three months later, they could swap in and out their shared body's 'driver's seat' with ease.

A little shudder went through Jodi as Sunny took charge. Jodi was now regulated to little more than a voice in her own head. But it was a condition she was more than willing to accept. Right now, Sunny was needed.

Sunny opened her eyes and made a weak smile towards Rock Keeper. The Soul gawked at her as he saw the transformation of her eyes. "W-W-What?" he stammered out.

"I'm sorry," said Sunny in the gentlest tone she could manage. This poor man had been stressed far more than a Soul was generally accustomed to. The least she could do was offer him some much needed relief. "My name is Sunny. We didn't mean to deceive you. But it's just Jodi could handle Tye and his family much better than I."

Still staring at her in utter disbelief, Rock Keeper's mouth worked silently for a moment, and then he blurted out, "Your host forcefully takes control? You must see a Healer right away. Such a thing is dangerous."

Sunny sighed. In his own way, Rock Keeper was just as obstinate as Samuel or Jasper. In his view, there was a way things were meant to be. A Soul controlled the host body. Not the other way around. "It's not like that. Jodi and I share this body. Neither one of us is battling for control."

"But…" and Rock Keeper trailed off, his head shaking back and forth as he seemingly wrestled with such an inconceivable idea.

'The medicine,' reminded Jodi. 'We don't have time for his silly hang-ups.'

Nodding in agreement with her other half, Sunny said, "Please Rock Keeper, can you unlock the cabinets? Tye needs the medicine."

The bald-headed Soul looked like he was finally coming to terms with Sunny's dual identity when her request spun him into more confusion. "But they're Humans... Why are you helping them?"

"Because their sister is sick. Possibly dying. She is suffering and does not need to. You can help her." She paused as a thought suddenly occurred to her. "And maybe... just maybe, if you help these Humans save one of their own, they will think differently about us. Possibly reconsider joining the armed insurgents."

Rock Keeper did not look entirely convinced, yet he moved to the front checkout desk and retrieved a small gold key from under the countertop. Walking to the back, he reluctantly capitulated. "I will give them needed medicines and show them how to use it. But after that, I want them to go. And not come back."

It was hard to say whether if it was Jodi or Sunny who first felt the little glimmer of amusement, but a wry smile spread on across her lips, and Sunny said, "I think Kyle can convince them of your terms."

Unlocking the first door labeled NO PAIN, Rock Keeper pulled out a dispensing tube of the analgesic. "Those other Humans, the ones who pointed their guns at their own kind," and he shuddered at the idea of the potential violence between the two groups. "Who are they to you? Are they... Jodi's friends?"

"They're friends to both of us," replied Sunny. "We help them, they help us."
Another shake of his head. More stunned disbelief. "What are you?" questioned the Soul.

That was a difficult question. One that Sunny and Jodi had spent a good deal of contemplating. And like a good Soul, Sunny answered truthfully – "We don't know."

###

Jared had planned for every contingency. Multiple ways of getting to the hotel. Various methods for accessing the penthouse suite. Different routes for their escape. But the one thing he had not counted would be Melanie not willing to go with him.

"Mel, com'on," insisted Jared. "We have to go."

The pain on her face made his gut twist. She was at war with herself because as much as she stood there refusing to move, her eyes betrayed her. Melanie wanted to go with him. Perhaps more than anything. But she clamped down on it. Forced her anguish away. Her head made the smallest movements back and forth.

"No," she repeated in a ghost of a whisper, "I can't."

He wanted to grab her, hold her tight, and run from here with her. Nearly every part of him desired to force her to come with him, even though a small cold, rational part of himself knew they would never make it five steps out the door before they were caught.

Jared spat out his next words in a near angry hiss. "Why not? What possible reason can there be for you to stay?"

"You don't understand, Jared. Oh, dear god, there is so much. So much has happened." Tears were building in her eyes. A little tremor went through her. "I can't even begin…"

He stopped her by wrapping his arms around her and held her close. She latched on to him as if he was a life preserver in the middle of a storm toss sea. "Whatever it is, whatever you've done, it's not your fault. Mel, you can't be held responsible for what Williams made you do."

Again, Melanie shook her head. He could feel the press of her face against his chest. "That's not it. Craig's a monster, but he's a Human monster. I can deal with him," she muttered irritably. "But he's nothing compared to what's been behind everything. Pulling strings for who knows how long. And if I'm even half right about what they've got planned…" She shuddered against him for the second time.

A gnawing sensation began to fill Jared's stomach. He had a decent idea of who Melanie was talking about. Before they had left for LA, Wanda had a long talk with Sunny and Jodi. A conversation about a race which should have been long dead.

Mel was speaking again, her words coming out in a quick, harsh whisper. "…There's these aliens the Souls meet a long time ago on their home world. You might remember Wanda telling of them in one of her stories."

"Vultures," said Jared.

"Yes," nodded Melanie. "But what you need to understand…"

"They're on Earth. Evidently for a really long time."
Her mouth hung open, and she blinked in stunned surprise. "How?" she breathed.

"A long, long story. Between what happened to Jodi and Wanda, they put a lot of it together."

Melanie's mouth worked up and down, but no sound came out. She then let out a deep sigh and tried again, but her words still tumbled out in a confused stream. "Jodi... Wanda... wait... how? But..."

This was all taking too much time. Every second Jared continued to stay here would raise the chance someone would find the sleeping bellhop, or one of the security guards in the hall would grow suspicious about how much time he was taking to deliver Melanie's meal. They needed to get moving. Now.

"Mel," he snapped, and his arm tightened around her waist, "You can talk all about it with Wanda on the way back home. But we need to get the hell out of here!"

Yet ever stubborn, she pushed on him, forcing herself out his grip. "Wait... Wanda's here? With you? Are you insane?"

"Not downtown, but she's here in the city. Helping me." His frustration rising, his voice rose, "She wants you back. Jamie wants you back. Don't you want to see them? They miss you terribly. And so do Jeb, Doc, Trudy, Lilly, and all the others. And damn it, I need you back, Melanie. Let's leave this damn city and never look back!"

They stood staring at each other, unmoving. A few tears tracked silently down Melanie's cheeks. But he could see it in her eyes. A raw determination. A silent fury. "And do what?" she asked in startling soft tone, yet there was ice in the undertone of her words. "Go back to Uncle Jeb's caves and plant crops, bake some bread, play soccer and stick our heads in the ground while the world burns? I can't. I won't, Jared. I have to stay here and continue my work."

"I've seen your work. I saw what's been happening in this city. How the Souls are being treated like slaves. How people are twisting themselves into something truly ugly." He jutted his hand out towards the wide windows overlooking the city. "This is what you want to stay in!?"

She looked away, shame touching her cheeks. "I know, believe me, I'm sick of it. I hate what I've had to do. But you need to understand I'm one of the few who are even remotely keeping this whole thing on the rails. If I leave, it will all fall apart."

"I can't say I see that as a bad thing."

"Because you don't understand what's been going on." She squeezed her eyes tight and wiped at her face with the back of her hand. Pushing away the tears. When she opened them, Jared saw she had reached some sort of decision. "But you can help. Both you and Wanda. I'm going to need you to take a message." She reached down to the sofa and picked up one of her pads of paper and a pen. As she jotted down notes, she continued talking. "I need you to find Doctor Robert Richards. He's working out of Cedars-Sinai. He's a friend. He can help you."

"Melanie, please," he begged. Jared could see where this was going. She would drag him into this whole freak show. The last time, at the airport Kyle had nearly lost his life, and Jared had seen his chance to rescue his Mel slip away. And it was happening all over again.

"Jared, you need to do this," she said firmly. She ripped off the top sheet and folded it in half. "Lives are at risk."

"And your life?" he asked.
She handed the note to him. A small smile managed to get on her face. "I can take care of myself. I've done it so far."

He did not take the offered piece of paper. He was stubbornly trying to hold on to the idea Melanie would come to her senses, agree to hide in the trolley, and leave with him. Even while it was becoming abundantly clear she had no intention of going. What had happened to her? A frightening thought began running in the back of his head. How much had she been twisted by Williams's cabal? Surrounded by people who did not just want to free Humans from the Souls, but to take their revenge on the parasitical aliens. Grinding the gentle Souls down until they were helpless before humanity.

But his thoughts on Melanie's motives ended abruptly when he heard the apartment's door to the outside opening and someone entering the foyer.

"Hey," came a voice the hallway, "What the hell is taking so long?"

In a split second, Melanie nearly jumped on him. Her hand shoving the single paper into his pants pocket as she leaned in and kissed him on his surprised mouth. She broke contact almost as fast and whispered into his ear, "Doctor Bob Richards. Cedars-Sinai. Tomorrow. I love you."

Then she standing away from him, her face a mask of cool indifference. She crossed her arms and said in a loud bored tone, "I'm in here, dressing down the idiot who once again brought up the wrong meal."

One of the security guards, the younger of the two who had stood watch outside of Melanie's penthouse poked his head around the wall leading to the apartment's dining room. He looked between Melanie and Jared, appearing reluctant to further enter the living room.

"Your order got screwed up?" he questioned. The guard was new at his job and uncertain how he was supposed to handle the problem. "Want me to call the kitchen?"

"No," said Melanie flatly. "What I want is you two morons to get out of my hair. I've got work to do, and I don't want to be bothered." She shot Jared one quick pleading look. He could almost hear her desperate praying for him to leave and escape this place. Then it was gone, and her mask was back.

He still felt the linger of her lips on his. Felt the crumpled-up piece of paper in his pocket. At the entrance to the living room, the guard had not seen Melanie's begging. He only saw the irritated glare of someone who outranked him. He gave Jared a weak shrug of his shoulders as if he was asking Jared what were they supposed to do.

Jared let out a tired sigh that did nothing for the anger or fear bottled up in his body. Melanie was playing a very dangerous game, and he did not even know who or what was at stake. But he had little choice. His planned rescue mission had ended in failure. There was no more time.

"I was just going," said Jared icily as he stomped across the lavish carpet and crossed the polished marble floor of the hallway. The guard fell in silently behind Jared, leaving Melanie all alone in her elegant empty penthouse.

###

The sun was a ruddy ball dipping low on the western sky. The green canopy of leaves overhead cast the floor of the forest into a murky darkness as the sun slipped below the horizon. Two figures
made their way through the maze of trees. They moved quickly as it would not be long before it was completely dark and movement became dangerous. Both carried flashlights, but using them—even briefly—could be dangerous.

"We should have headed back half an hour ago," said one as he navigated through the underbrush.

"But I caught a second fish," said the other. He held up a fishing line with two smallmouth bass hooked to the end. "Our host bodies need the protein," he added as he stepped over a large gnarled root on the ground.

"I collected plenty of nuts and berries for nourishment," informed the first. "We'll need a fire to cook the fish. That is risky."

"We've not seen any sign of humans in the past two weeks," replied the second. "We are far away from any of their encampments or their occupied towns. I believe we are safe to start a small fire."

The first man considered his friend's request. Just because they had not seen any humans did not mean there were none around. Humans, they had learned the hard way, were excellent hunters and trackers. The irony was not lost upon him that their host race was better at being Seekers than his kind had ever been.

"We will discuss it with the others and make a decision. We are nearly there."

His friend was about to reply when his sleeve caught on some of the tangled vines of briar bush. At one time his coat had been a neatly pressed black jacket. The standard uniform of a Seeker. But over the weeks which had turned to months, his clothing had repeatedly been ripped and dirtied until it had become nearly unrecognizable. The curved thorns held fast to his clothing. He yanked hard, and the edge of fabric ripped and pulled free.

"I will be glad to move on from this spot," he said as resumed his walking. "Too many of these prickly bushes grow here."

"We must remain in the thickest parts of these woods," said the first. "We can't afford another encounter with the human rebels. Unfortunately, this means the unpleasant undergrowth will remain constant."

His companion had no response. They continued in silence for a few minutes longer. By now the forest was filled with dark shadows. But their steps were confident, for they knew their way, even in black inkiness of the woods at night. They were almost to their home. It was hidden in a grotto which ran between two thickets of trees. The thick cluster of oaks provided a natural camouflage against prying eyes. Even from eyes flying over in a helicopter.

As they made their way down into the hollow space between the giant trees, another man stepped out from behind one the giant trunks. He carried their only gun, a rifle at the ready. As soon as he saw in the dim shadows his friends had returned, he immediately lowered the weapon.

"I was beginning to worry," he said, "when the sun began to set. What took you so long?"

"Justin was catching fish," said the first man as the second raised the results of his efforts. "We did not mean to worry you, Second Sunrise."

Seeing the two fish, Second Sunrise's eyes widen. "Ah, we shall eat well tonight."

"Possibly," replied Justin. "But Sky Roost has pointed out we will need to start a fire to cook them. We will need to decide if it is worth the risk." He looked around for their fourth member. "Where
"Sleeping," replied Second Sunrise.

The three men continued into the grotto. At its lowest point, right in the center, lay a tent. It was small and not in the best of conditions. Its canvas cloth was ripped and stitched back together in multiple spots. But it provided these rouge Seekers with a measure of protection from the elements and the random wildlife.

"Bright Moon," called Justin towards the tent, "Bright Moon on Fallen Snow, we're back with food."

From inside the tent came a masculine grunt and then the sounds of someone moving. A zipper was pulled, and part of the flap on the front of the tent was pulled back. Then a head popped out. The hair on the head at one time had been short and spiky but had grown out into a tangled brown mess. A patchy beard covered the lower part of the face. And if had been enough light, the soft brown eyes would have glowed with rings of silver.

"Great," said Bright Moon with a grin, "let's eat."

Chapter End Notes

Several of my readers have asked about the jump forward in time. Yes, it is permanent and it was meant to be jarring. A lot has happened, but I will be filling it in through some back story about what occurred. What's happening in LA may seem a bit improbable, but I ask you to bear with me. There is more going on behind the scenes. Future chapters will lay it all out, but next chapter we get to find out what happened to Marc and Bright Moon.

As always, read, review, and enjoy.
The dream was the same, every night. It always started in sweltering darkness and bone crushing pain...

"...Ahhh" came a hoarse cry of distress from somewhere. Marc was uncertain where...or who. To be honest, he was not sure of anything. Where was he? It was dark and difficult to breathe. He tried to move, and an intense spike of pain shot through his body. He screamed. The air was hot and stifling, and his howl of pain soon descended into fits of dry coughing.

As he choked down his last heaving cough, Marc finally put together the yelling he had been hearing was from himself. He tried to take stock of his body. Everything hurt. Vaguely he felt like he had been tossed into a washing machine that had been set to spin dry. Aches and pains all over his body. The strongest of the hurts was coming from his left leg. A deep pain, bone grinding against bone.

It was broken. Marc opened his mouth and let out a loud series of angry expletive curses into the hot darkness that surrounded him. His words did not change his predicament but did make him feel a little better.

"What the hell happened?" he asked aloud. Marc laid back and tried to remember. That was the first thing he realized. He lay on his back. On a cement slab or floor. There was little else to see in this inky blackness. So Marc fell silent and listened. Faint creaks and groans reached his ears. The noises were not human. No, it was the sound of considerable amounts of steel and rock shifting and settling against each other. The sound of ruin.

Marc had been in the bunker. Right. The bomb shelter full of Seekers. Sage of Tides, the military leader of the Souls. He had been here as well. More details came back to Marc. Something important. A phone call...from Ian. Wanda had found something in Mia's memories. Something impossible. It had all clicked together in Marc's mind. The Facility's actual plan. Then like a dam bursting, the memories flooded back to him. Running down the tunnel, trying to warn the Seekers. The news that cities around the world were under attack. Then the explosion. Powerful enough to crack the reinforced underground site apart. And now Marc lay in those ruins. Had anyone else survived?

But overriding this question was a more important one. Marc's returning memories brought a detail of great importance. Marc had not been alone. She had been with him. Where was she?

"Bright Moon!" called Marc.

The groaning noises originating from the slow subsiding of the ruined bunker continued nonstop, but Marc thought he caught the sound of a reply. He yelled her name again. And this time he was certain he heard her answer. Coming as a weak, pitiful moan of pain.

"Hang on," said Marc and tried to move again. His left leg pulsed with pain. Trying to stand would be next to impossible. However, crawling was doable. It would be painful, but he could manage. He just had to know where to go. It was so dark. He needed light.

No, he chided himself, he did not need light. He had lived for years underground. Tamed and
mastered the darkness. He knew how to navigate by sound and touch alone. He closed his eyes. An unnecessary step given the lack of illumination, yet helpful for Marc to focus his mind.

He reached out slowly with his hands. Touching, tracing, and testing the surrounding environment. Chunks of cement, rock, and other wreckage were all around him. Careful exploration discovered a long column of concrete. His hands traced over twisted metal rebar jabbing outward from the pillar. Part of the support columns reinforcing the walls of the bunker. Or it was. It had toppled over. Anyone underneath it when it fell would have been instantly crushed. And it had missed Marc by inches.

With a loud grunt of pain, Marc turned himself on his stomach. His broken leg screamed in protest. He sucked in a few ragged breaths as the sound of his blood pounded in his ears. After the agony subsided, Marc began to drag himself forward.

He was not even sure if he is going in the right direction. All he had was a gut instinct. As he dragged himself forward, his hands continued to explore. It was not long before he reached his first body. In this pitch black tomb, with only his hands and his ears, he is limited to only the most basic of information. He touched a shoe, moved higher and found a leg.

Pulling on the leg, he gasped out, "Hey? You okay?"

No reply. Was it Bright Moon? Sage? His hands traced up the body. Definitely male as he surveyed the body. Marc whispered, "Sage?"

No answer and he soon found out there would never be one. Near where the unknown man's head should be, Marc found something hard and solid. A large boulder. The head was simply gone. Marc forced down the rising nausea in his throat and started to go through the dead man's pockets.

His exploration revealed a prize. A cell phone. With shaking hands, Marc turned it on. The small rectangle of brightness was like a supernova to his light-starved eyes. He blinked a few times as his eyes adjusted. The screen was cracked but readable. The phone's wallpaper had a picture of a man and women unknown to Marc. They hold each other, loving smiles on both their faces. He wears the dark uniform of a Seeker. She does not. Of course, both have the silver sheen in their eyes.

"Sorry," muttered Marc to the unnamed Soul couple. He wondered for a moment about the woman in the picture. Where was she? Does she know her partner was dead? Was she dead? Killed by Facility's attack. That thought brought an edge of fear to Marc. Chicago? He had not heard the Seekers call out his city's name when listing the sites coming under attack. But that does not mean his home has not suffered the same fate. He feared for his friends back at the Hotel Rose. They are as close to him as a family. They are his family.

This thought brought him back to the phone. A call for help. But a quick study of it revealed there was no cell signal. Marc had no idea of the conditions above ground. The bunker had been designed to withstand a nuclear blast. Whatever the Facility hit it with could have easily destroyed the airport. But most of the Seekers were out searching the countryside, looking for the hidden Facility. They would quickly return for a rescue operation. He just needed to hold out until then.

Marc panned the cell phone around. The trickle of light from its screen revealed many more details of what was left of the bunker. The ceiling had partially collapsed, and the walls had buckled inward. Leaving much of the interior covered in dirt, rock, and other rubble. The big support columns which had reinforced the room now laid broken and twisted all around him.

And there were more bodies. A few clearly dead from the state of their shattered and broken forms. With his feeble flashlight, it was hard to tell the condition of the others. They could be only
knocked unconscious. Or they could be dying.

He dragged himself forward and call her name again. "Bright Moon!"

This time he got a clear response. A shaky, "M-Marc?"

Her voice was faint, but strong enough he could find the direction. He pulled himself to the right and maneuvered around the ruined remains of one of the Seekers' workstation and desks. His makeshift flashlight catches a bit of honey-brown hair. He panned the light down and found Bright Moon trapped underneath a slab of reinforced concrete. She was on her stomach, pinned to the ground. Everything past her shoulders was covered in debris.

In the blurry light from the cellphone, her face was gray and slick with sweat. She blinked slowly once and then again. Her gaze was glassy and unfocused. The silver in her eyes, always so strong, looked muted and weak. Marc dragged himself to her until they were face to face.

"Hey," said Marc as he reaches out a gently touched her. Her skin was clammy and cold. She was obviously hurt, but the question was how badly. "Can you move? Can you tell if anything is broken?"

Bright Moon weakly pushed her hands down on the floor and tried to pull herself forward. She moved less than an inch before crying out in pain.

"Okay! Okay!" said Marc in a rush. "Don't move. You're wedged in good under those rocks. Let me see if I can budge them."

Marc grabbed onto the nearest chunk of rubble and gave a tug. It came loose with a bit of effort. But it's only a small piece of the heap of wreckage burying Bright Moon. He continued to dig away, slowly revealing more of the trapped Bright Moon.

"You're...hurt," said Bright Moon with a bit of effort. With an unsteady stare, she was looking at Marc's left leg.

"Yeah, I think it's broken," replied Marc as he worked.

"Anyone...else?"

"Not sure," admitted Marc. "Found a couple people dead, a few others I don't know." He took a moment to look around the ruined bunker. "We got smacked, hard."

Bright Moon feebly nodded in agreement. Marc saw her eyelids droop and her head sagged against the broken floor.

"Hey!" he shouted in warning. "No passing out on me. Got to keep awake."

"Cold," whimpered Bright Moon. "I'm...so cold."

Marc stopped his efforts and reached out to Bright Moon. He touched her face again, cupping his hand against her grimy and sweat soaked cheek. Then he tenderly stroked her hair. A soft sigh escaped Bright Moon's lips. "Mmm...nice," she whispered.

Marc whispered back, "It's going to be okay, sweetheart. I'll get you out of there."

His gentle touch helped. Bright Moon opened her eyes again, and they were more focused. The silver in them stronger. Marc smiled happily at her improvement, but her next words bring no
"Marc, I can't feel my legs...I can't feel much of anything."

Undeterred, Marc went back to pulling away rubble. "You Souls' medicine can fix anything," he replied. "We just need to get you out of here. Your Healers will patch you up in no time."

He tugged at a larger piece of plaster and stone. Unable to stand it was hard work to pull the rubble away. Sweat began to pour down his face. The air was growing hotter and becoming stagnant. Whatever ventilation system the command center had it was clearly not working. Panting, Marc finally yanked the debris covering Bright Moon's body away. What he saw caused him to let out a gasp of alarm.

Rebar from the reinforced concrete of the walls had become broken and twisted when the bunker caved in. The splintered remains of the steel beams had been thrown in all directions. And as Marc gazed in horror, he saw that three of those steel rods had impaled Bright Moon. Going into her gut, ripping through her body, and bursting out of her back.

The rubble and ruins covering Bright Moon had hidden the severity of her injuries from Marc. He did not have much in the way of medical training, but he knows the wounds are grievous. How much blood has she lost? The warped metal rebar jutting from her body was coated in her blood. The answer is obvious to Marc - far too much. He noticed one of the rods has gone straight through her center. It was no wonder why she cannot feel anything - her spine was shattered.

Bright Moon had heard Marc's gulp of panic. "What is it?" she questioned.

"I-It's not...bad," stuttered Marc as he tried valiantly to put on a reassuring smile.

"Liar." Her voice had already grown weaker.

A lump formed in Marc's throat. His mind was desperately racing to find a solution. "Look, it's not the best. But we just need some HEAL and SEAL, and you'll be fine."

Bright Moon's eyes are closed, and her breath was becoming shallow. After a few labored exhales, she managed to wheeze out, "...Emergency Kit."

"Good idea...Great idea," replied a now enthusiastic Marc. That was the solution. A First Aid Kit might not be able to heal all Bright Moon's injuries but could keep her alive long enough to get her to real help. Now he just needed to find it. Everything in the bunker, all the workstations, communication equipment, desks, chairs have been thrown and tossed all over the place. Undeterred Marc began to dig, toss, and rummage through the debris looking for any sign of the kit.

"Com'on where is it?" he snapped as he shoved a half crushed monitor out of his way. His search was slowed by his own injury. He had to crawl everywhere, dragging his bum leg along. It was only growing more painful as he moved about.

Marc had obstinately pushed away thoughts about how long his search was taking. He could easily look for hours. Time was rapidly running out for Bright Moon. He had nearly given hope on the current pile of wreckage he was searching through when he came across a white metal case. It was partly concealed under a flipped over desk. With rising excitement, he grabbed the box and yanked it free. It was not large, fitting neatly into the palm of Marc's hand. But there was a large red plus on the top, with the words 'Emergency Kit.'

"Jackpot!" cried Marc.
As fast as he could drag himself, Marc returned to Bright Moon's side. He found in the time he had been gone her skin had turned ashen, and her breath came in short, shallow pants. Marc hurriedly opened the small med kit and took stock of the contents. His face fell when he saw what laid inside. There are four vials - HEAL, CLEAN, SEAL, and NO PAIN. But the little bottles contained inside were far too small. Bright Moon would need at least a gallon of HEAL to repair the worst of her wounds. The only other object in the container was a small sharp surgical blade.

"Damn it!" barked Marc in a frustrated sigh.

With effort, Bright Moon panted out, "What's...wrong...?"

A feeling of helplessness pulled on Marc. Bright Moon was fading fast. Her body's blood was steadily leaking out. "I found the kit, but there's not enough. Hardly enough to fix a minor cut. What type of first aid can someone do with so little medicine?"

Her response is slow and slurred, "...for uss...not youu..."

Marc stared at the small box. Initially confused by Bright Moon's answer, he began to put it together. To a Soul, their hosts were ultimately disposable. If a body had become too severely damaged, the first and most vital task would be salvaging the little delicate soul inside. A painful acceptance started in Marc. Bright Moon's human body was dying. And there was nothing he could do to stop it. But Bright Moon the Soul could still live. This kit had all the necessary tools to complete the job. Except one – a Cryotank. Perhaps there was one, somewhere in these ruins. Yet to find it would take time that he simply did not have.

With a hard swallow, Marc asked, "How long can you...the real you, live outside a host body?"

"Not long...minutes."

"Thought so," replied Marc as an impossibly crazy idea started to form in his mind.

Bright Moon's eyes open. The silver in them has faded. She sucked in a deep breath and let it out. Gathering her rapidly fading strength. "Marc, I'm sorry I got you into this...I'm so sorry we Souls...hurt Humans. We shouldn't have come here...taken your world."

Her words are soft and heartfelt and Marc's eyes began to sting. She was saying her goodbye. He started to say her name, but she pushed on. "But I'm happy I did come...meet you...love..."

His plan was crazy. But it was not the first time Marc had been accused of doing something insane. Not willing to wait, he interrupted her. "When you take over a body, do you need to be guided in...or helped to be hooked up?"

Stopping in what Bright Moon must have felt was her final words, a baffled bewilderment showed on the Soul's face. "Umm...it's instinctive. We just..." Then her eyes widened in horror as she realized what Marc was planning. "No..."

"It will work. You can live in me."

"No...Marc," she weakly sobbed.

He put himself right next to her. Face to face. "It's temporary. Think of my body as a loaner."

"Don't want to erase you..." Her eyes are frantic, but her strength has run out. The rest of her reply came out as a low moan.
"I'm too damn stubborn to be erased," he told her with reckless optimism. "I put you in me, then we get the hell out here. This will work!"

Marc's mind was made up, and that resolve gave him a wild sense of crazy calm. He knew exactly what he needed to do. Removing the top of the NO PAIN, he quickly swallowed down several doses. He needed to cut the back of his neck open. Not the easiest thing to do as he will do this by touch alone. Soon the agony of his broken leg had disappeared. Experimentally Marc pressed the edge of the surgical knife to the nape of his neck. It was an odd sensation, he can feel the edge of the blade, the pressure against his skin. But there is no pain. His senses are not numb; it simply does not hurt.

With an unsteady sigh, Marc began to cut along the base of his neck. He can faintly feel the fake scar put there by Simon's previous work. The doctor had given most of Marc's people the false indicator of a Soul's presence. The mark made blending in with the aliens that much easier. Now it severed as a guideline for a real insertion.

Blood coated his hands and began to run down his neck. The thought that Bright Moon will have to clean up his mess gave Marc a slight grin. He glanced back to the Seeker whom he had fallen in love with, and his smile vanished. Her eyes are open, but unseeing. Her body does not move. The woman that was once Julia Rickman, and then was the host for the alien known as Bright Moon on Fallen Snow is gone.

His hands shake from rising fear. How long can a Soul survive in a dead host? He felt the back of his neck with his finger. Warm, sticky blood covered the self-inflicted wound. Is the cut wide enough? Deep enough? Marc did not know. But he has no more time.

Working carefully, he made a similar incision on the unmoving body. The blood does not flow as fast. There was no heartbeat to pump it through the arteries and veins. The process is much easier when Marc can see the knife's cut through the skin and muscle. Soon he saw a glint of something reflective in his makeshift flashlight. Small and silver. It moved and stretched within the body.

"That's it," said Marc.

He reached into the thin slit and began to pull. The little creature resisted. Not wanting to leave. Afraid to pull too hard on the silver form, he began to shout in frustration. "Com'on, don't fight me! I'm trying to save you!" It shrank back into the body. As far as Marc knew Souls did not have ears. But somehow the Soul can sense his anger. He tried again. "Please? Please come out. I want to save you. You don't get to die on me." The small little ribbon of silver relented, and Marc slowly edged it free.

In the palm of his hand, he held the real Bright Moon. The little alien parasite. It was the first time Marc has seen a Soul up close. Strange. Beautiful. Unlike anything he had ever seen. A glittering silver ribbon with hundreds of hair-like tentacles which billow and wave in his hand.

Forcing down another gulp of panic, Marc let out an unsteady laugh, "Alright love, here we go."

He cupped his hands together and reached behind his head. He pressed up against the newly created incision. Within moments Bright Moon the Soul began to push and weave into the wound. Moving on instinct. Going deeper. Making its way into Marc's body.

A war has started inside Marc as soon as Bright Moon began to enter him. For his body is rebelling against him. Revulsion climbed through his gut and up his throat. The bile choked him as the pressure in the back of his neck intensified. The Soul has started to wrap itself around the edge of his spinal cord. The urge to rip this thing from his body grew until his whole body shook. He is
willing letting himself be taken over. He should fight this with every fiber of his being. But Marc clamped his jaw tight. Forced his every instinct to go silent. Willing his rebellious body to be still.

He will do this.

For her...

"...Ahhhhhh" came the cry from Bright Moon's throat. The scream came from the point between sleep and awareness. That moment between the end of the dream and being fully awake. Then like book snapping shut, Bright Moon shot forward on the thin mattress. Panting breaths come from the body. Sweet-soaked panic pulsing from a racing heart. The last remnants of the nightmare started to fade. It takes more than a few second, but the Soul began to calm the body down.

"You'd think after months of this I would be used to it," muttered Bright Moon.

Looking around, the Soul sees that the others in the tent are still sleeping. They have grown used to the nightly screams. Seeker Justin rolled in his sleeping bag, but his constant snoring showed he was still asleep. A quick glance out the front showed their earlier fire had long gone out. The deep darkness of woods told Bright Moon it was still hours before sunrise.

After a few minutes of sitting in the dark, Bright Moon stood up. Returning to sleep is pointless. Careful to not disturb the others, the Soul sluggishly opened the tent flap and stepped outside. A half-moon casts a dim glow through the canopy of leaves above. Even in the middle of summer, the night air is cold in the vast forests of upper Michigan. Bright Moon shivers.

"Here," said a voice. "Take my jacket." Bright Moon turned and in the faint light saw Seeker Sky Roost. He is sitting on a nearby stump, his turn at keeping watch for the night. Rubbing his hands together to keep warm, he smiled his always cheerful smile.

"You need it more than I," replied Bright Moon.

"If you are going to search, you will need the extra clothing."

A flush formed on Bright Moon's face. "Am I that predictable?"

Giving his fellow Soul a brief contemplative look, Sky Roost nodded. "Your nightmares have become quite regular in their timing. And so is your ritual of isolation afterward." He paused. "I do not want you to get cold while you search for Marc."

"Thank you, Sky Roost," said Bright Moon, taking the offered coat. The Soul tipped the body's head towards the tent and the other sleeping Souls inside. "Not everyone else understands."

"In all honesty, I don't understand either. In all these hard months, you have not felt or heard Marc Walters at all. His conscious is gone." He saw the pain on Bright Moon's face and shook his head sadly. "But...I understand your need. You must try. It is your nature."

Bright Moon took the offered clothing and slipped it on. There is a moment of awkwardness as the two Souls stand staring at each other in the faint moonlight. There is not much more for either of them to say. Then Bright Moon turned and began to walk out into the dark. The Soul headed towards a small clearing in the forest. It is not far just enough so the others will not hear.

Once there, Bright Moon sat upon a half-rotted log and gazed up at the starry night sky. After a few minutes of silence, Bright Moon asked out loud, "Marc, where are you? Every night it's the same dream. That must mean something. What are you trying to tell me?"
But there is no answer. No flicker of thought from Marc's mind. The same as it has been for months. After a while, Bright Moon sighed. Pulling the jacket closer, the Soul began the search. Looking through the host brain. Reviewing Marc's past, seeking to find him somewhere in the twists and turns of memory and thought...

"...Almost there," grunted Marc as he put his weight into pushing down on the large pipe wrench. His gloved hands tightened around the tool's handle as he strained in effort. Then he heard a hard clunk as the coupling finally moved into place.

Stepping back, Marc surveyed his work. His 'borrowed' yellow hardhat with an attached light provides ample illumination as he studied his repairs. He could just make out the faded words "City of Chicago Water Works" on the steel-grey pipe. The newly installed piece looked out of place on the water main running along the tunnel wall. Its aluminum casing is fresh and shiny, albeit a little crooked, against the aging cast iron tube. It might not be the best looking plumbing job in the world, but that does not matter much to Marc. The old worn pipe will not be breaking anytime soon.

Over the years of living in the tunnels below Chicago, Marc and the others have developed a simple philosophy – If it isn't broke, the Souls don't come a-knockin. Having the water main rupture would have flooded this tunnel. The Souls would then have sent in a repair crew to stomp around the tunnels to fix the pipe and clean up the mess. Significantly increasing the chances they might discover the hidden nest of Humans. Hence Marc's impromptu repair job.

Satisfied, Marc pulled off his gloves and picked up his various tools. He started to make his way out of this particular tunnel. Living with twenty-nine other people in tight quarters could be very taxing. Needing a little time to himself, he had gone to do the repair job alone. It's good to get out of the house occasionally.

The cross section of pipes and duct works in this tunnel make it a narrow path. Turned sideways, he inched around an old steam vent that been out of uses for decades. Then he ducked his head as he passed under some low hanging plumbing traveling to who-knows-where. It was a genuine maze in this section of the underground. Built and rebuilt over the course of the city's life there is no one map of this place detailing all its many turns and twists.

Stepping past the last of his obstruction, Marc weaved about to move into a larger and easier to travel corridor. His mind was on their upcoming raid to resupply some of their food storages. Briefly, he wondered if he might be able to make time to see Autumn Gusting Wind. It's been awhile since he's been out to see the Soul. Distracted and his mind elsewhere, as he went around the corner and quite literally ran into someone else.

Stunned, he jumped back. As did the other. Both very surprised to meeting anyone else down in these dimly lit passageways.

Just as startled, the woman in black said, "Oh..."

Marc's mouth opened and closed. An "Uhhh..." escaped his lips.

She shook her head and took a steadying breath. "I'm so sorry...I didn't mean to scare you. I didn't think there would be anyone else down here." Panning her flashlight around the service corridor, she looked about. An investigative expression appeared on her face, and she asked, "Are you working down here by yourself?"

A long pause followed while Marc stared in blank shock at the Seeker. His mind is running a
million miles a second. Why is a Seeker here? How did it find its way into his tunnels? Where are the others? Seekers always come in groups. If there is one, a dozen more are likely around the corner. And most importantly – how could he be so stupid to run into one?

"Is something wrong?" she asked with a concerned frown as the silence between them went on.

It dawned on Marc he believed he was a Soul. One of them. Just a typical worker going about his business making repairs to the city's infrastructure. With his hardhat and bundle of tools, he was dressed the part. Her misinterpretation of who and what he is gave him an idea.

Marc began with a gentle smile, just as a Soul would. "My apologies," he said serenely. "I did not mean to be rude. You did surprise me. But I became worried when I saw a Seeker down here. I assumed you were hunting for wild Humans."

"Ah," replied the Seeker. She gave a light shake of her head, sending her ponytail lightly swaying back and forth. "Rest easy my friend. I am simply exploring this city's many tunnels. There are no current reports of Humans around here."

Marc calmly nodded his head in agreement. Yet he has noted she was wearing a holster on her hip. For someone who was just 'exploring,' this Seeker had come armed into these tunnels. She continued to probe with her flashlight around the tunnel, meticulously chasing away every shadow. He took a moment to study her as she looked around. Her body is slim and athletic, probably around his own age. With her honey-blond hair and clear blue eyes, she has a simple, yet pleasing appearance. But Marc knows appearances can be deadly, especially when Seekers are involved.

"You did not answer my question," she said while poking her head down the narrow passage Marc had just exited. "Are you down here by yourself?"

"The job was simple. I could complete the task by myself," lied Marc.

"It can be dangerous to come by yourself. These dark tunnels can be treacherous." She paused and then added in a hurry. "I've had some experience with places like this. I'm prepared for such activities."

"Ah," said Marc. "So you also came down here by yourself."

The Seeker pulled back from the maze of pipes and returned her attention to the floor of the tunnel. The light of her flashlight revealed a hint of embarrassment on her cheeks. Meekly she shrugged her shoulders. "I tried to talk several other Seekers into joining me, but they declined. Apparently, they have searched down here many times and have grown tired of the endeavor."

Suppressing a darkly gleeful smile, Marc once again bobbed his head like a good Soul. He knew all too well of the many attempts by the Seekers to find any trace of his people. His tricks and deceptions had kept the aliens running in circles as they chased down false leads and faked evidence. Eventually, they gave up the hunt. It had seemed the Souls had convinced themselves the city was clear and free of any Humans. For the last few years Marc's little clan had flourished in their underground home. But that had changed several months ago when some girl from the outside had wandered into the city. Evidently looking for some hidden family members. She had gotten herself caught, and suddenly the Seekers were once again on edge. Their certainty about the lack of Humans in Chicago was in doubt. They had come into the tunnels, looking for any signs and once again Marc had to play his games. Now this Seeker had come, marching around down here like she owned the place.

Evidently satisfied with his story, she turned back to Marc. "It is nice to know others are willing to
come down here," she informed Marc. A smile crept its way onto her face. "Perhaps we could explore these tunnels together...er..."

Her words faltered in her throat, and her eyes go wide in surprise. In turning around, her flashlight was briefly directed at Marc's face. He had not been able to turn away fast enough. His eyes, his human eyes, did not shine with the expected silver. Marc had been so close to pulling off this ruse. Just a few minutes more and he could have gotten away without her being any the wiser. And now through dumb luck, the Seeker knows the truth.

"Crap," sighed Marc.

Still shocked by Marc's real identity, the Seeker began to say "You're a Hu..." But Marc did not give her the chance to finish. Already he was moving. He thrust his arms out and gave her a hard shove. Arms pinwheeling, she stumbled back. Before she could regain her footing, Marc spun around and took off like a suddenly released coiled spring.

"Come back!" she cried as he vaulted away.

"No thanks!" he shouted over his shoulder.

Feet pounding on the old bricks making up the floor of the tunnel, Marc ran into the waiting darkness. His heart pounded in his chest, and his blood roared in his ear as he pushed himself ever faster. But soon he heard pursuing footfalls. The Seeker is chasing him. She was quick and determined to catch him as she rushed after him. Marc cast off his tools and gloves as he rounded a corner. He needed every bit of speed.

The illuminating beam of his hardhat's light swayed unevenly back and forth as he ran. It cast surrounding walls and ceiling in washed out gray as the darkness is pushed back. Up ahead the light revealed a dark, uneven crack along the wall. It is a section of the tunnel washed away in flood from years ago. Marc and the others have subtly expanded the gap until it is just wide enough to pass through.

Turning sideways he slipped into the crack. He has so little time, he can already hear the Seeker's labored breathing as she neared. The uneven sides of flaw press into him painfully. Yet he clawed forward, forcing his way deeper. Marc was nearly to the other side when she reached the opening of the gap. The beam of her flashlight caught him as he successfully pulled free.

"Stop!" yelled Seeker.

"Make me!" sneered Marc as he took off in the new tunnel.

His shortcut through the crack in the wall has taken him from the old maintenance passageways to one of the city's countless drainage tubes. The bottom of the shaft is curved like the walls and ceiling. Added with the recent rains, a few inches of cold, dirty water flowed down this drainage tube. Making the floor was slippery and slick. Marc had to slow his pace. He had not gone more than twenty steps before he heard a painful grunt come from fissure behind him.

A grin spread on Marc's face as he continued to move. "Got to be careful," he shouted. "Some real sharp edges in there."

More sounds of someone struggling through a very tight place reached his ears. It was always possible the Seeker could get stuck in there. That would make things much easier though Marc. But he did not have such luck. All too soon he heard the surprised gasp of her stepping into the cold water followed by the splish-splashes as the Seeker guardedly followed after him.
"Stop!" she again demanded. "This is dangerous."

Marc frowned to himself. She was catching up too quickly. She had gotten through the narrow crack faster than he expected. "Well then, turn around and go home," he replied.

Sloshing through the murky stream, the Seeker began hurling questions and accusations at Marc's retreating backside. "What are you doing down here? What were you doing with those tools? Were you damaging the water pipelines? You will not get away with such sabotage!"

Marc grumbled silently to himself. Of all the nerve. He had gone out of his way to fix the rusty pipe, and now she was accusing him of trying to break it. He was preparing a pithy comeback when he heard a loud splash and a cry of alarm.

Risking a few extra seconds, Marc turned around and looked down the tunnel. She was sprawled flat on her face. Cold waste water flowed over and around her, soaking her black uniform. If he had to guess, the Seeker had moved a little too fast on the slippery curved floor and had lost her footing. Letting out a chuckle, Marc resumed traveling down the drainage pipe. Trying to run here was foolish. Slow and steady won would win this race.

"You alright back there?" he asked. The only reply he got was an irritated groan, and all too soon he heard the Seeker once again splashing after him. Now her movements are slower and much more cautious. Yet she doggedly continued her chase. That was all right with Marc, he was rapidly reaching his destination.

The tunnel turned to the right and then began to angle downhill. Marc was ready for this. No one knew this underground labyrinth like him. Instead of trying to climb down the slimy and slick shaft, he sat down in the icy sludge and pushed off against the sides of the tunnel. He began sliding forward. Another thrust against the sloped walls and Marc was shooting forward. Unfortunately, this underground waterslide was not any fun to use. The water was smelly and freezing, the floor rough and uneven. But it was fast. In a few seconds, he had tripled the distance between himself and the Seeker.

His ride ended abruptly in a large circular basin. Pulling himself up, Marc inspected his would-be trap. Dozens of drainage pipes of all sizes connect with this room. Rainwater and other waste runoffs flowed in from a dozen different direction. The floor sloped downwards and the collected outflowing pooled towards a central drain in the middle of the room.

Quickly Marc moved off to one side from the mouth of the tunnel. He took off his hardhat, pointed the beam of light away, but did not turn it off. He waited. Would she follow him or head back for reinforcements? The answer came soon enough. The constant flow of water into this room provided a steady babble of background noise. However, his ever-persistent Seeker made a good deal of racket as she descended the drainage pipe. As she neared, Marc threw his hardhat. It landed with a splash at the far end of the room. The fast moving current of the pooled water pulled on the brightly colored helmet. Soon it was bobbing up and down as it spiraled around and around. It's attached light illuminating the slick dark waters.

Huffing with effort, the Seeker began to climb out of the drainage tube. She had crawled down the sloped tunnel on her hands and knees. Without knowing where it exited, she had taken the prudent and cautious route. Marc knew she would. Souls were always sensible. They never threw caution to the wind. It made them predictable. Still, this one had chased Marc farther, all by herself, then any other. Something was different about this Seeker. And Marc intended to find out.

She spotted the floating hardhat right away. It was hard to miss as it rapidly circled the center drain. Besides her flashlight, it is the only other source of light in this dark cavern. It drew her
attention, and like a moth to a flame, she moved towards the bobbing light. She panned her light about, careful with her every move on the damp floor. In the shadows behind her, Marc slowly advanced.

He was almost on her when she whirled around. The beam of her flashlight caught him like a spotlight on the center stage. Her eyes widen in alarm. And in a frantic rush, her gun was yanked out of its holster.

"S-Stay back, or I will shoot," she ordered as she pointed the pistol at Marc with an unsteady hand.

Every muscle in Marc's body froze. His eyes never left the barrel of the gun. It was pointed at him and held by a hand that is far too shaky for Marc's comfort. He then cocked his head slightly to one side and said, "You're not going to shoot anyone. The safety is still on."

He honestly did not know if she had taken the safety off or not. Yet the old trick worked. For just a moment her attention was drawn to the small slide on the side of the gun. It is all the time he needed. He launched himself at the Seeker, going low, right for her legs. The split second of her hesitation passed, and she attempted to retrain the gun on Marc. But it was too late. He slammed into her, knocking her flat on her back. They struggle for the weapon, pushing and grasping. She had better grip, but Marc was stronger. All too soon he has wrestled it away from her.

"Well now," said Marc as he examined his new prize. A 9mm Beretta. The standard issue weapon for a Seeker. "Guess the safety was off after all."

He was kneeling on her legs, his weight pinning her to the ground. Her hair and face are dirty and wet from her chase and their fight. On her back, she glared up at him. Smiling at the change of fortune, Marc began to stand up. As he did, the Seeker promptly kicked him in the groin. A long low moan pursed out between Marc's lips. He staggered away, clutching at his most sensitive area.

From behind him, the Seeker said, "I had heard Human males don't like being hit there."

"We don't!" growled Marc.

Still smarting, he swung around. His arm out with the gun. She was getting on his very last nerve. Time to put an end to this. She was sitting on the ground, rubbing her arm. Her blue eyes coldly tracking his every movement. Even with the gun pointed at her, she does not show any fear. And in his pain and anger, Marc hesitated. The obvious move to shoot her was not the smart one. Her body with a bullet to her head will only draw more attention from the other Seekers. But what else can he do? Take her to their sanctuary? That's a crazy idea, even for him.

She still does not move. Her flashlight, which had rolled away during their fight, cast them both in pale yellow light. The rings of silver in her eyes faintly glow from the illumination as they stared each other down. By now his hardhat with its attached light had been sucked down the central drain. The only light now comes from hers.

It was like they are reading each other's minds. The flashlight. Without it, this underground waterway is as dark as midnight. They both lunge towards the small cylinder of light at the same time. But the Seeker was closer. She grabbed onto it and with a final faint smile at Marc, flicked it off. Utter darkness filled the chamber.

He could fire blindly. He might hit the Seeker or more likely miss. He exhaled a disgusted sigh. In the cold darkness around him, the only thing he can hear was the constant stream of water pouring in from a dozen different directions. He might have the gun, but she controlled the light. They are stalemated.
In exasperation, Marc fumed, "Who the hell are you?"

He did not expect her to answer. But surprisingly she does. Her voice echoed from the darkness. "I am called Bright Moon on Fallen Snow."

"What?"

"My name. You asked me who I was. I answered."

Marc's anger stewed in his gut. He ached all over, and he was wet and dirty from his trek through the storm drain. All because of this damnable Seeker. "Well it's a stupid name," he snapped.

"Why? What is wrong with it?" Absurdly she sounded annoyed.

"It's too long. Takes forever to say it. I got bored just listening to you rattle it off. What was it again?"

She started to repeat her name, "Bright Moon on..." Marc interrupted with his own version, "Bright Light to?"

"No...Bright Moon on Fallen..."

Marc began to grin as her voice grew increasingly irritated. "Moon over Pollen Blow?"

"No! Bright...Moon...On...Fallen...Snow!" she shouted in the pitch-black room. "What are you, mentally deficient?"

Marc could not help it, he laughed out loud at her insult. She was quite unlike a normal Soul. Also, very unusual for a Seeker. He did not know exactly what she was doing down here, but she was becoming quite amusing. Plus, her shouting was making it easier for him to find her over the continual babble of the water flowing into the drain. He took a few hesitant steps towards her voice.

He murmured with subdued dark humor. "Oh, you can just call me an idiot, plenty of people have."

"So your name is idiot," came her voice. He jumped, startled at how close she was. Evidently, she too had homed in on him as they had argued in the darkness. He landed awkwardly on the slanted floor of the basin and tumbled backward into the rushing water with a loud splash.

Her flashlight flicked on. Panicking, Marc was already bringing the Beretta up when the sudden explosion of light blinded him. On reflex, his hand squeezed the trigger, and the gun went off. But the shot was poorly aimed, and the bullet completely missed the Seeker.

The echoing of the gunshot was still reverberating around the room when the flashlight was hastily switched off. The utter blackness rushed into the chamber. Marc stood up, the icy water soaking into his clothes and shoes. "Uhh...sorry about that." He stopped. Why was he apologizing?

"You tried to shoot me." Her voice was shaky, and Marc could not tell if it was from anger or fear. Likely a bit of both.

Growing irritated with himself, Marc shot back. "You're the one chasing me! If you'd leave me alone, I'd leave you alone!"

"Monster," muttered the Seeker called Bright Moon on Fallen Snow.

"Takes one to know one," countered Marc.
He could hear her moving again. Trying to put some distance between herself and him. But she will not risk the flashlight again. Marc sighed to himself. He could not win this fight, but he could escape it. This was not good. This Seeker Bright Moon had learned of his existence. There was little he could do to minimize that damage. She would escape back to the surface and bring a swarm of Seekers. He and the others would have to prepare.

"Well Bri, I think we should call it a day. We're both cold, wet, and exhausted."

"Bri?" Her questioning reply came from farther away. Likely she was trying to find a drainage tunnel out of this place.

Marc began to travel in the opposite direction of her voice, grouping his way forward in the empty blackness. "You know, Bri. Like B-r-e-e. A much simpler name."

"I don't like it." A pause. "What shall I call you? Idiot?" There almost seemed a bit of humor in her words.

Despite everything, Marc found himself smiling. He knew he should not answer her question. But he did anyway.

"Call me Marc..."

"...Nobody ever made fun of my name before," said Bright Moon aloud in the empty clearing. "Your mockery really did make me angry."

This had become a habit with the Soul. Speaking as if Marc was there. Hopeful the rummaging through his memories would somehow force him to manifest. But like so many times before there was no reply. Yet this did not deter Bright Moon.

"My name," continued Bright Moon. "I'll admit it lost something when it was translated from the Bears' native language. It would be roughly - 'Grrrgh...Errt Glugg...Merrr.' Although Human vocal cords aren't quite up to the job." Bright Moon laughed. "Com'on Marc, you know that's funny."

Nothing.

Bright Moon sighed. The Soul looked down at the feet of the body. Kicked a little stone on the ground.

"I never did tell you how I got my name. I don't like to talk about it. The story is...unpleasant."

A cloud drifted across the moon and the dim light in the clearing faded. Bright Moon looked up at the night sky. After a few minutes, the Soul began to speak again to the nonexistent Marc.

"See on Mists World there was this ceremony called Naming Day. Where the youngest Bears received their names. The ritual was performed when the largest moon was full and at its closest..."

The herd of Bears moved slowly across the vast ice plain. Guides lead the procession, each one very familiar with the route of the pilgrimage. It was a tradition of the Bears stretching back long before the coming of the Souls. The largest moon of Mists World was reaching its apex in the sky and Naming Day was nearly here. Most of the others followed in a steady single line as they transverse the icy, windswept tundra. A few others kept a careful watch on the plains. The path they crossed was known to be safe, but on this world, the Souls had learned you could never be too cautious. Claw beasts were always a threat.
The young one moved along with the others in her herd. She was eager for their arrival at the second Crystal City. They still had half a day journey ahead of them, but the very tops of the high spires of the city were coming into view on the horizon. Not fully grown, she stretched and jumped about, trying to see the glittering pinnacles over the taller adults.

As she bounced and swayed, jockeying for a better view, a questioning voice spoke up from behind her. "Youngling, what are you doing?"

She immediately stopped her prancing, she knew that voice well. Embarrassed, she turned to the speaker. "I am sorry, Eldest. I had heard the others say they could make out the spires of the city. I wanted to see them."

The Eldest was tall. Literally towering over the child. Her white fur full and thick. Signs of robust health among the Bears. But it was not her size and strength which commanded such respect. The Soul who occupied the body had lived for a long time on this world. There were few like her. So many lives. So many experiences.

"I understand," said the Eldest as she began to walk beside the youngling. She scanned the horizon for a moment and added, "But there is little to see from here. Once we crest the next ridge, we will be able to get a better view."

Disappointed, the young one slumped her head. "I shall have to wait. I should be more patient."

Bears do not laugh, but they did understand amusement and the joy of a child. "Come," said the Eldest, "climb on my back, and you will be able to see what I see."

"Yes, Eldest!" excitedly exclaimed the youngling. Quick and nimble she clambered up the back of the great Bear. Clutching at the tuft of fur on the neck of the old one, the child held on tight. With the added height, she soon caught sight of the procession's destination. Sunlight reflected and danced on the distant peaks. Even at this distance, the rainbow scattering of colors was breathtaking.

"Beautiful!" cried the youngling as she saw for the first time the tips of the glistening towers of ice.

"It is a sight," agreed the Eldest. "But you only see the very tallest spires. Wait until we get closer. There is much more to see."

"I wish we could go faster."

"Mmm," mused the Eldest. "We always must be careful when traveling the ice plains. Even over well-established routes. You know this."

"Yes," agreed the youngling as she worked to control her body's excitement. Climbing down the big Bear, she offered in a more somber tone, "Sometimes my host gets so excited. I scarcely know what to do."

"This is your first life, is it not?" asked the Eldest.

"It is."

"Ahh, then Naming Day is doubly important for you. No wonder you are so enthusiastic." The Eldest then gave the youthful Soul an inquiring look. "Have you decided on one?"

"My name? I don't know yet." She paused, thinking it over. "The other younglings sometimes call me 'Playful One.'"
"That is not much of a name. Perhaps 'Eager to See' would be a better."

The youngling thought it over. "Maybe. I have been so wanting to see the towers of the second crystal city I had not given the actual purpose of Naming Day much thought."

"You still have time to decided," said the Eldest. "Think about it."

The youngling readily agreed. For a while the Eldest walked silently alongside the smaller Bear, her great size casting a long shadow on the windswept land. The youngster lost in thought over an appropriate name to give herself. Soon, however, two of the guides approached the Eldest. Worried expressions on their fur-covered faces.

"We have spotted a claw beast," they reported in unison.

"Where?" asked the Eldest.

"Far to the right of the herd. It is at a distance, but its appearance is concerning."

"We shall give it a wide berth. Let us turn towards the left and take the narrower path towards the city."

"Yes," agreed the guides. They hurried back to the front of the procession and quickly conferred with the others about changing their direction.

Upon seeing the youngling's concern, matched by others in the group, the Eldest was quick to reassure them. "Do not worry, we shall stay far away from this beast. We will not give it an opportunity to attack."

Despite their size, Claw Beasts rarely directly attacked their prey. They preferred ambushed traps, digging great pits in the snow banks to hide their massive bodies. Leaping out only when their food came near. They were dangerous, but only to the unwary. The creatures lacked the intelligence to be a genuine threat. With these facts in mind, the herd of Bears turned and journeyed away from the sighted claw beast. Confident it would not follow.

But it did.

What no one knew was this claw beast had been hurt in a recent avalanche in the nearby mountains. In pain and hungry, it had been driven to desperation. It would not wait in a trap for prey to wander close. The ever-blowing winds on the plains had given it the scent of traveling Bears. Now it bounded after them, its massive body surging across the field in pursuit of its prey.

The Eldest had witnessed the savagery of Claw Beasts and understood their threat unlike few others. She quickly dispatched the fastest runners from the herd. They would rush to the nearby city for aide. But other members of the pack, especially the younglings, would not be able to run fast enough.

Scanning the desolate ice highlands for some measure of safety, she spotted an outcropping of ice and rock. A small sanctuary in the vast flat plains of ice and snow. The rough formation was just close enough for them to reach in time.

"We shall make for that grotto," said the Eldest as she pointed with two of her four arms. "We will hide within. The claw beast's great size will not allow it to get at us."

As one, the Bears began to run. The claw beast saw this and bellowed in rage as it saw its prey trying to escape. An adult Bear could move quickly, but the youngling and some of the older
bodies in the herd were slower. So, the health and the strong helped the weak. Carrying and holding as they all struggled to reach safety.

"Come, child," said the Eldest as she scooped up the youngling. "Climb on my back as you did before. I will carry you."

She did so and held on tight as they began to pick up speed. Her four arms clutching to the old Soul's body. "I am scared," she whimpered into the rush of wind as they ran.

"Do not fear, little one," said the Eldest. "We will make it. Our shelter will protect us until help arrives. Then we will have a tale to rival Lives in the Stars ride on the claw beast's back."

They made it with seconds to spare. The outcropping of ice and rock has been carved by the winds over countless years, providing a natural hollow of space for the fleeing Bears. They hunker down and hide within. Then the great claw beast bounded up. It roared with evident triumph. Its prey was right in front of it. But the creature soon found it was not so easy. Its giant claws could not fit into the narrow crevices formed by the grotto. Again, and again it tried in vain to reach its quarry.

Tightly packed in with the others of the herd, the youngling was squeezed close to the Eldest. "You see," she panted as the monster roared outside, "we are safe here."

"Y-Yes, Eldest," agreed the youngling. While this was her first world and first host body, the young Soul still understood enough to hear the fear in the old one's words. They were in grave danger.

Lacking the intellect to attempt a more cunning attack, the claw beast was reduced to slamming its massive pincers against the stone and ice of the outcropping. What it lacked in nuance, it made up for in brute strength. The cavern where the Bears huddled together began to shake from the blows. Before long the ice began to crack and crumble. Then part of the wall of the crevice gave way. The giant stone-like pincer from the claw beast tore inward. An unlucky bear was caught within the claw's grasp and was yanked outside. The sound of a sickening crunch was heard as the creature ate its hard-won prize in one greedy gulp.

Cries of despair came from the terrified Souls. Not only the host body lost, but also the attached Soul. But the claw beast was not done. Its long hunt had finally brought it food. And it was still hungry. The pincer returned, seeking more. It tore, it gouged and ripped its way deeper into the crevice. The claw beast was clumsy and awkward in its attempts, and the Bears packed themselves together as tight as possible as they tried to avoid the massive claw. But then the terrible talon clamped down on one of the younglings. Tearing the young Bear's body apart.

Souls were not ones for violence. It was not in their nature. Yet as the Eldest saw the carnage, a bellowing cry ripped from her throat. "NO! NO MORE!" Her scream as loud as the claw beast's roar. She jumped up and ran to meet the attacker. Just as she reached the giant pincer, she leaped upon it. The claw beast was momentarily confused. It had not expected it prey to run straight at it and grab on to one of its powerful arms. It shook and tossed, trying to shake the Eldest free. She hung on, despite the claw beast's best efforts. The sharp knife sides of her hands digging deep into the animal's hide.

With the claw beast distracted, the other Bears took the opportunity to escape. The herd rushed out of the grotto. But not the youngling. She stayed, watching as the old one fought and wrestled with the great beast. With all six of her hands digging in. The Eldest crawled up the massive arm, slashing and cutting as she went. And the blood poured freely from the wounds, falling upon the clean white snow. Thrashing about, the beast roared in pain. Combined with its previous injuries it began to weaken and slow. When the Eldest reached the head of claw beast, she started to hack
away at the tough furry hide, deepening the blood loss.

The Eldest was tiny compared to the sizeable bulk of the claw beast, yet she was inflicting great pain to the creature. In desperation to knock the stinging insect aside, the massive beast reared back on its hindmost legs. It rose as high as a small mountain. Through awestruck eyes the youngling saw the Eldest at the very top, fighting to hang on. She yelled a warning to the old one, but there was no time for the Eldest to escape. The great claw beast fell onto its back with a thunderous boom and kicked up an enormous cloud of snow. It crushed the old Soul under it great weight, but in doing so it drove the Eldest's sharp knife-like hands deep into its body. Delivering the final killing blow.

Rescue soon arrived from the second crystal city. The snow kicked up by the battle had slowly drifted down, covering everything in a fine white powder. It cast an eerie calmness over the tragedy. They find the youngling huddled near the Eldest. She had tried to pull the Soul from the shattered body, but the damage done was too great. She sat in mournful silence, watching the largest moon, full and bright, rise high in the night time sky.

They ask her her name, not knowing she had yet to go through the naming ceremony. The youngling looked upon the bright moon and the freshly fallen snow. This moment would shape and define her across all her lives. It will give her purpose and guide her to her calling. To be strong and to protect those who cannot protect themselves. She chose a name to remind her and to offer tribute to the fallen Eldest.

"I am Bright Moon on Fallen Snow..."

For a while Bright Moon sat on the log and stared up at the moon. Lost in memories of long ago, on another world and different life. Earth's moon is small in comparison to the Mists World's largest satellite. But there is strange symmetry between the here and now and that terrible day. The loss is painful, like a sharp knife to the heart.

'T'm so sorry, Marc,' thought Bright Moon. 'I just can't find you. I've looked everywhere.'

Bright Moon wearily stood up. Even with the jacket, the cold had settled into Marc's body. Shivering, and still thinking of the past, the Soul started to return to the campsite. And then it happened. Among all Bright Moon's many memories, a little flicker of thought trickled through the Soul's mind.

'Lost to me...'

Bright Moon froze. The tiny whisper was alien. Other. It did not belong to the Soul. After all these months.

"Marc?"

There was no answer, but there was a thread of mental current to follow. Tiny. Weak. But real, not imagined.

'Marc? Marc, can you hear me?'

The reply did not come in words, but in emotion. Empty despair. Great loss. The feeling was twisted with Bright Moon's own. The grief over the death of the Eldest. But the anguish was Marc's. Not Bright Moon's. Slowly the Soul pulled on the tight knot of tangled memories.

The child sat huddled in the empty cold night, sobbing for his father. Then his mother. Then Sister
Mary-Margret, followed by Autumn Gusting Wind. And then so many others. It was not an actual memory. Not a true place or time. But it was real to the child. This was a site of mourning and sorrow.

Bright Moon drifted into this dark place. 'Marc, come to me. Please come back.'

But the child did not move. Still lost in his private grief. It took a moment, but Bright Moon finally realized the mistake. The wrong name. Marc was a name he had given himself. But there was a time when he was a child with a mother and father. And a different name.

'Christopher,' called Bright Moon, 'come back to me.'

Christopher, as the child speaks. 'Everyone is gone...everyone is lost me.'

'No,' said Bright Moon. 'I'm still here. I'm so happy I found you. Please...remember who you are.'

Bright Moon's former host body suddenly appeared in the inky nothingness. Her blonde hair tied back in a pony and her black Seeker uniform neat and spotless. 'You died,' whispered the child.

'My host body did, but me, the real me, you saved. You sacrifice yourself for me. I didn't want you to, but then again you never listen to me...'

The child gave Bright Moon a careful look. 'That's because you're such a pain in the neck.'

The Soul laughed out loud. 'You're right. I am. I'm a little silver worm in the back of your neck. Wrapped around your spinal cord. With a few hundred of my tentacles tied into your insane brain.'

Bright Moon's delight of that moment burst into the dark place. Pushing away the shadowed sadness. Bright Moon could feel it. Something was rising out of the depths. Marc was coming back. With every bit of effort, the Soul struggled and pulled on the emerging mind. Bringing out of the darkness and into the light of awareness.

'That's it! Com'on Marc. Come to me!'

A slow, thick thought bubbled up in the Soul's mind. 'Bright...Moon?'

Overjoyed, Bright Moon jumped up and down. Let out a whoop of excitement. "I'm here! You're here!"

'What's...going...on?'

Bright Moon sighed and sat back down on the log. 'That is a very long story.'

Marc was confused and disorientated. His mind still stuck on his final moments in the ruined bunker. His thoughts came slowly and with difficulty. 'Where...are...we?'

Bright Moon nodded. There was much to tell Marc. Much had happened over the last few months. And so the Soul began to explain. 'We are deep in the forest in upper Michigan. Far from any city. Running for our lives...'

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the delay on the chapter. An audit at work has consumed a good deal of my time. Hopefully, I can get the next one done faster.

Next chapter: Jared and Wanda make a shocking discovery in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, Bright Moon and Marc adjust to their new living conditions.
"Look, this is the last time I'm going to explain this to you worms...The choices are monkeys, cats, or dogs."

The man lecturing the group of Souls of their choices stood behind the front check-in receptionist counter at Cedars-Sinai. His hands were on his hips and an exasperated annoyed frown on his face. He was on the shorter side. Probably coming up just an inch or two higher than Wanda estimated Jared as he watched from his seat across the hall. Even though the man was not very tall, he still carried an intimidating air of authority. His black hair was trimmed into a short crew cut hairstyle. Combined with his dark eyes and his even darker scowl he seemed to almost radiate a tight, angry field of administrative irritation. As if everything here was beneath his concern.

The Souls, there were four of them huddled together in a semi-circle, all had their faces collectively fall at the pronouncement. "But," said one in the group, a young woman with frizzy brown hair, "I don't want to be inserted into an animal. Isn't there some other option?"

"Yes," snipped the man behind the counter, "I can have the security guards out front come over and yank you out right now. And maybe we'll get around to putting you in a Cryotank if we feel like it."

The Souls blanched at the threat. The frizzy haired woman closed her eyes, and a few tears trickled out. The other three members of the little family were all quick to hug and try to comfort. They squeezed together for a few heartbreaking moments before the woman dried her tears and opened her eyes.

"I-I guess a dog then," she sniffed as she fought back further tears.

"Fine," replied the little man, still uninterested at the Souls' misery. "Just fill out this paperwork, and we'll get you processed."

He handed over a clipboard with some papers. The Soul woman took it with shaking hands. One of the others in the group, an older man, put his arms around her. "It will be alright, Traces the Sky. We will take good care of you in your new body. And if...Dawn wakes up...we'll be given additional food rations..."

"And on that note," put in the man behind the counter. "If your host body does recover, remember she will have full privileges in the city. All of you will obey every command she gives. Failure will result in the loss of your food rights."

"We remember the rules," muttered the Soul quietly.

If Jared had not gotten to know Wanda, Sunny, and even Burns so well, he would likely not have pickup on the trace of resentment in the Soul's gentle words. He would have only heard the meek reply Souls usual gave when faced with the outstanding threat of the Los Angeles Free Zone. It was subtle, but it was there. Anger, outrage, loathing, and disgust. All those negative emotions Souls claimed they did not have. Humanity was once again teaching the Souls something new - How to hate.

His primary example of that lesson sat right next to him. Wanda's small hands were balled so
tightly into fists her knuckles were white. She had been actively glaring at the whole tragic affair. Her grey-silver eyes never left the family of four as they shuffled over to an empty row of chairs. Soon they would become a family of five. With the soul Traces the Sky inserted into a stray dog, and if she were lucky, Dawn the human host would wake up to a bizarre new world.

"Unbelievable," hissed Wanda through clenched teeth.

Jared put a hand on Wanda's clutched fist. "I'm sorry." He did not know what else to say.

Her hand under his relaxed, the tightly coiled muscles slowly loosening. She let out a sigh as a puff of air she had been holding back. There was not much either one of them could do. If Wanda had tried to intervene, she would have detained immediately by the ever present Free Zone security. With the most likely result her true self - the small, fragile silver alien - pulled from her host body and discarded. Jared would not have fared much better. While the security in the hospital might not stop him from interfering, they would most certainly question him. Check his identity. View him with an enormous amount of suspicion. And after last night failure to rescue Melanie, he needed to keep a low profile.

He had debated about even coming to the hospital. Just ignoring Melanie's plea and head back to Arizona. Remaining in Los Angeles was going to be risky. But he could not turn away, not just yet. He needed to understand why Melanie would risk everything to stay here.

"It's alright," said Wanda after a minute. "It's not your fault, Jared. You're not the one being so cruel." Her voice was softer, calmer. Yet the anger still lingered in her words. "There's just no need to be like that." Looking pointedly at the short man behind the counter, she continued, "He could have been kind. He could have promised her safety to another world. Not shove her into dog's body."

Jared readily agreed, but his curiosity tugged at him. "What will it be like for Traces the Sky?"

"You mean existing in a lower animal with a smaller brain?"

"Yeah."

Wanda's expression turned pensive as she considered her answer. "I don't know exactly how it would be, as I've never been in a dog's body," she finally answered. "I suppose she'll like to chase a ball, bark at the mailman, or whatever dogs like to do."

"But she'll remember who she is? What her life was like before?"

"Oh yes," agreed Wanda with an unhappy grimace. "Most likely just enough to realize how much she's lost."

Confused by her answer, Jared frowned in puzzlement. Wanda nodded as she took a moment to articulate her response. "It's difficult for me to explain it in a way you could understand. Our sense of self is always with us. But our ability to experience life, to comprehend it, is mainly based on our host bodies and their abilities. As a Spider, I could do calculations as fast as any Human computer. Make sense of large equations. But my eyes could only see in black and white. So, while I might understand the concept of the color, I wouldn't be able to fathom a red apple or a blue sky. Now that I'm in a human body I can see colors, but only dimly remember how to factor polynomial prime numbers in real time."

Jared leaned back in his seat as he thought over Wanda's explanation. "Dogs have a better sense of smell than humans. She'll be able to pick up all types of scents we can't. But their eyes aren't the
same as ours. And they hear sounds in a different range than people."

"Yes, it will be confusing for her. She'll remember things like a car, a book, or a TV. But she won't be able to recall how any of it works. Her new eyes won't be able to make out printed words. Conversations will move too fast for her to follow. Her mind will be limited. Slowed down by the smaller brain she'll be attached to."

Jared looked over to where Traces the Sky was filling out the forms that would 'authorize' her own removal and shook his head. He had heard the LA Free Zone had started this practice, moving Souls from Human hosts to animals like dogs and cats. This was the first time he had been witness to the event. It was claimed that Souls who chose this option were doing it for the greater good. There might even be some truth to this, the Souls had said they would receive additional food if Traces the Sky's host woke up. But he could not disagree with Wanda. Everything about this was unnecessarily cruel.

A new voice interrupted Jared's private musing on the ongoing abasement of the Souls. "Excuse me, are you the ones looking for Doctor Richards?"

Jared turned away from watching Traces the Sky to find a dark-haired man standing before them, dressed in the typical blue scrubs of hospital staff. He looked to be roughly Jared's own age. But it was a little hard to tell. The man had several days' worth of subtle on his face and dark bags under his eyes. He looked like he was just barely awake.

"Umm...yeah we are," replied Jared.

The man briefly eyed Wanda, but his attention quickly came back to Jared. "What's this about?"

Melanie had said to find Doctor Robert Richards at Cedar Sinai. However, she had not told Jared why beyond the vague warning that lives were at risk and the doctor was a friend of hers. The note she had hastily shoved into his pocket did not give any clue as to what was going on. It was filled with a series of numbers and letter. Some type of cryptic code. He and Wanda were in unfamiliar and dangerous territory, with no clear idea who they could trust. Jared was going to play this close to the vest, and keep his answers short and simple.

"It's kind of personal. It'd be best if we talked to Doctor Richards directly."

The man wearily sighed. "The Doc is busy. Unless this is something life or death, he really doesn't have the time."

"Well," said Wanda, more than a little testily, "it is an emergency. We need to see him right away."

He gave Wanda a longer look. A touch of surprise on his face at a Soul being so clearly angry. "And can you explain the emergency? Tell me what is so important?"

"No," snapped Wanda, "I can't."

Shifting his gaze back to Jared, the man leaned closer, and his voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "Look, I don't know what the deal is, but if she goes mouthing off like this in front of the wrong people, she is going to have a very bad day."

Wanda leaned in as well, her voice dropping into angry murmur which sounded a lot like a growl. "I have survived far worse days than your simple little human brain could imagine."

The man blinked in astonishment and then made a sound between a snort and chuckle. "You would be surprised." He shook his head and asked Wanda, "What's your name?"
"Drifting Clouds," answered Jared.

But Wanda gave her own answer, her voice filled with a growing heat. "I'm tired of always lying. My name is Wanderer."

Jared shot Wanda a tight frown of disapproval. She should not be using her actual name here. Neither one of them should. Far too dangerous when Craig Williams and his cabal were looking for any sign of resistant Souls and sympathetic Humans. Wanda saw his grimace but did attempt to correct the slip-up. Her frustration had been slowly building since they came to LA. She had watched, helpless, as her people were threatened, abused, and generally treated like slaves. Last night when he had returned without Melanie, explaining she had refused to come with him, Wanda's mood had taken a dejected dark turn. The final straw to break the camel's back. Now after watching Traces the Sky lose her host body, her very rare anger appeared to be bubbling over.

Attempting to quickly rectify the misstep, Jared added hastily, "She's got more than one, you know how the buggers love have all those names from other worlds."

Yet his lie made little difference. Their questioner got a very strange look on his face. For a moment, he looked like he was listening to an unseen and unheard voice. Then he gave his head a hard shake like he was attempting to dislodge something. He let out another tired sigh and sat down next to Wanda.

"You know," he said deftly. "It's likely best you stop using that name. There was a security alert this morning to keep an eye out for a Soul going by the name 'Drifting Clouds.' Something about a missing security badge." A wisp of a smile came to his face. "She was accompanied by a guy calling himself 'Matt Stamons.' And both of you would fit the given descriptions."

A line of ice went down Jared's spine. He had not planned on staying in the city after his stealing the security badge. They, along with Melanie, should have been far away from here by now. The guards from last night had seen his face, put enough together to realize their deception. It was very possible coming here was a fatal mistake. Jared saw Wanda wore a similar worried expression.

"Hey, hey," said the man as saw he put his hands. "No worries. I'm trying to help. It's best we get you two out of the front lobby before someone does recognize you."

"Who are you?" asked Jared, still uncertain about the man's good will.

The man's small smile spread to become a wry grin. "The name's Noah." His head bobbed up and down as he looked to Wanda. "And I've heard quite a lot about you, Wanderer."

###

'Okey thumb, move,' commanded Marc. The thumb on Bright Moon's left hand did not even twitch. Trying again, Marc concentrated. 'Move.' Nothing happened. Still determined, Marc began to mentally chant, 'Move. Move. MOVE. MOVE!'

Bright Moon sighed. 'Marc, it's not going to work. I'm sorry, but I can't give you back control of your body no matter how much I might want to.'

'Damn, this feels like I'm stuck in quicksand. I can't do anything."

'Sorry.'
Marc pondered his failure. 'Wanda made it sound like Melanie could take back her body when she was really determined. I figured I should be able to do the same.'

'It's not that simple,' replied Bright Moon. 'Wanderer would lose control when she was distracted, and Melanie was upset or otherwise intensely emotional. I'm not distracted, and you're not angry.'

Dark humor rose in Marc's mind. 'So, I've got to distract you...' Almost immediately he started concentrating on the many pranks and tricks he had played in the past on the Seekers in general and Bright Moon in particular. Bright Moon did not find Marc's antics very distracting, just annoying.

'Behave,' lightly scolded Bright Moon. Soon the Soul was pressing back, clamping down on Marc's stream of offending memories. Push – Marc dumped a bunch of hungry rats in Bright Moon's apartment. Pull – Bright Moon shoved the repulsive memory away and recalled the rooms neat and clean, and rodent free. Push. Pull. Neither one gaining any advantage. There was no animosity in their struggle, it was almost playful. Both were still joyful at Marc's recovery.

Unknowingly interrupting their spirited bickering, Seeker Justin sat down next to Bright Moon and handed over a cup of water. Seeing the abrupt startled expression on Bright Moon's face, Justin grew confused. "Is there a problem?"

"Um, no," said Bright Moon, taking the offered drink. Internally the Soul gave Marc the mental equivalent of a 'Shush!' to make him be quiet.

"We have a little left," clarified Justin as Bright Moon drank from the cup. "But we all must keep hydrated. Hopefully, we can find a source of potable water."

"Agreed," nodded Bright Moon. "I will keep my eyes open as we travel."

"Very well," said Justin as he stood back up. "We'll be leaving in five minutes."

"Understood."

They watched as the other Seekers fold up the tent and prepare to get underway. Marc was puzzled over Bright Moon's attitude. 'I don't get why you won't tell the others that you found me. They all know you were looking. Why not say something?'

Another mental sigh. 'I'm worried...I don't know how they will react. I don't want to cause further problems.'

Marc groaned. 'This is about you Souls' ridiculous obsession with controlling your host bodies. Of not being seen as too weak to manage a resistant host. You wanted me back, but you're embarrassed in front of the others.'

'No. It's not like that,' insisted Bright Moon.

'Then explain it me, please. I'm still trying to get caught up here. I'm waking up to find more than three months have passed since the bunker. You tell me Chicago was bombed, but you don't know how bad. War has started back up between Human and Souls, but you don't know who's winning. And the Facility has some sort of super weapon called CURE. What the hell has been going on?'

'Marc, I know you're frustrated. I'm sorry. There is so much. I can't even begin...' Bright Moon trailed off as the Soul considered how to explain. But there really was no need. There was a faster way. Bright Moon opened up, and let a torrent of imagery of the last few months flow forth. 'See it through my eyes, Marc...Feel the memories...All of them...'}
And Marc did. It began with Bright Moon's horror of waking up in his body and finding him gone. Then rescue by desperate Healers digging through the rubble of the bunker. Sitting in a makeshift tent acting as a healing center while the fractured bone in the leg was repaired. Hearing the news about the cities around the world...Chicago. All of them burning. Then reports coming in of the Seeker task force going missing. No one knowing what was happening. Chaos reigned.

Bright Moon first sees CURE being used by a crop dusting plane flying low over a field of Souls. The black gas spraying out behind the aircraft. The foul-smelling cloud settling on the startled crowd. A few cough and cry out, but in seconds they all fall to the ground unconscious. Some Souls run to help their fallen brethren. They too succumb to the mysterious black smoke. It does not take long before the true nature of the gas is revealed. A few of the bodies wake up...Human. Disorientated. Frightened. They stare at the those who escaped the gassing. Bright Moon and the other Souls gaze back. Astonished. Horrified. What has happened to their kind inside these Humans?

At first, for at least a few minutes, there is a strange calm between the now two divided groups. The Humans recognize the Souls. Remember them as friends, colleagues. But soon they recall more. Of lives stolen. Their world lost.

"What have you done to us!?!" comes their outraged cry.

More Humans wake up. An angry mob forms. The Souls are quickly finding themselves outnumbered. Bright Moon and the others run. The Humans give chase, but they are still disorganized and relatively few in number. Escaping, the Souls try to find others of their kind. They soon meet others fleeing from former friends. Black clouds of CURE are drifting down all over the place. Nearby towns which would have been safe havens are now dangerous strongholds of newly recovered Humans.

Days grow to weeks. The Souls are constantly being hunted by increasingly organized and determined Humans. They are driven deeper and deeper into the surrounding forests. In the vast woodlands of northern Michigan, there are many places to hide. But it is a difficult transition. Food, water, all the conveniences of modern civilization are gone. Yet they struggle on, desperately trying to find their way to safety.

All the while Bright Moon seeks to find Marc. He has simply vanished from his mind. Nothing works to bring him back. The Soul even begins contemplating getting caught. To be purposely exposed to the black gas. It would evidently bring Marc back. But at what price to Bright Moon? It is becoming abundantly clear the returning Humans are discarding Souls which previously controlled them. Horror at the loss of life begins to solidify into a real, palpable anger by the usually peaceful, nonviolent Souls.

Word reaches the Souls of a gathering of their forces. Tens of thousands of hastily gathered Seekers and other volunteers are gathering in the small town of Iron Mountain. They will use their greater numbers to crush the ongoing insurgency of Humans and restore order. Bright Moon reluctantly takes part. Hope for the peace between the two races Bright Moon had fought for with Marc looks to be a dying dream.

There is a high confidence among the Souls gathered at Iron Mountain. They have the numbers. They can stop the violent Humans. These creatures are proving themselves to be every bit the monsters the Seekers have always claimed. Their threat must end.

Bright Moon tries to bring Wanderer's warning. The Humans are not alone in this fight. The long thought dead Vultures have returned. They are arming the Humans. Underestimating them could be a fatal mistake. But the advice is ignored by the other Souls. Since the attacks on the cities, the
Souls have soured on the Wanderer's message of coexistence between humanity and their people. Wanderer is a traitor, they say. Corrupted by the Humans. Anything she has said is a lie and cannot be trusted.

The Battle of Iron Mountain is a massacre for the Souls on a scale not seen in a long, long time. The attacking Humans number less than two thousand soldiers, yet they dominate the battle. All the weapons the Seekers initially brought to fight the Facility have been recaptured by the Humans. They use the terrible tools of war to their maximum effect. Raining hell down upon Bright Moon's unsuspecting people.

The Souls had brought gas masks they believed would protect them from the Humans' most powerful weapon. But the black gas CURE had already been improved. Now it could be absorbed directly through the skin. Even the smallest dose can incapacitate dozens. For every host body lost, the Human Resistance Army gains a recruit. The Souls weaken. The Humans grow only stronger.

The Humans had been relatively few and far less organized than the Souls, yet aided with their captured weapons and their powerful CURE gas, they destroy the strong and the many. As their forces fall, Bright Moon and a handful of others once again go on the run. The Souls have been completely routed. It is once again a desperate struggle as they escape into the surrounding wilderness.

Nearly twenty Souls flee with Bright Moon. In the beginning, they hoped to make their way out of the thick forests and reach territory still held by their kind. But the Human forces come for them again and again. They are relentless. Soon the Souls are whittled down to just a handful. For last two weeks, they have taken refuge deep in these woods. Far as possible from the now powerful reborn humanity.

Marc took all Bright Moon's memories in. All of them. A profound silence filled his mind. Finally, he weakly whispered, 'My God, I've woken to a nightmare.'

'Yes,' replied a gloomy Bright Moon. 'Your people have regained power in the region. My kind are being systematically eliminated. I fear how the others will react if they find out your mind has returned.'

'Why?' asked a still horrified Marc. 'Why did you even try to bring me back?'

'You sacrificed yourself for me. I just couldn't let you go. Maybe I was just stubborn...'

Breaking into their silent conversation, Seeker Justin handed over a pack of the Seekers' few belongings to Bright Moon. The other Seekers were already prepared to leave. They were waiting on Bright Moon.

"Are you ready?" asked Justin.

With the memories of the past few months still fresh and raw, and Marc's mind still trying to process it all. Bright Moon let out a troubled sigh and answered, "Yes, let's get going."

####

Jared had gone to Cedars-Sinai uncertain what to expect. And after meeting Noah, Jared was only growing more confused. The man had led Jared and Wanda on a complicated route through the hospital. The place was a massive complex of buildings, and it did not take long before Jared was thoroughly turned around. They passed through bustling offices, busy waiting rooms, even into an
operating room being prepped for surgery. Along the way, they encountered many Souls. The hospital employed thousands, and while the administrative staff had been replaced with Humans loyal to Craig Williams, most still working here were Wanda's people.

At first, the Souls they passed would go silent at seeing Jared and Noah. Meekly looking down, avoiding eye contact, even with Wanda. However, as they went deeper into the hospital, the Souls' attitude changed. They were friendlier. They apparently knew Noah and were quite happy to see him. They were still a little skittish around Jared and Wanda. But when Noah came across one of the Healers, a plump older woman with the ironic name of Tiny Waves, he told her who they were. The Healer immediately pulled them both into a tight hug.

"Oh! I'm so pleased to meet you both," she had said after letting go of a startled Jared and Wanda.

Confused, Wanda had asked, "You know us?"

"You are Wanderer, Melanie's friend, are you not?"

"Yes...I am," answered a still confused Wanda.

"She told me all about you when I met her," Tiny Waves had gushed. "I was scared of Melanie at first. All the Humans before her had been so mean. But she was nice to me..."

Noah had then interrupted. "Okay, Tina," he had said with a sigh, "we shouldn't talk here. We need to get to Bob's office."

Tiny Waves, who apparently went by the name Tina, had nodded with a look which could almost be called mischievous. "Agreed."

Both Wanda and Jared were baffled, but Noah and the Healer had not offered any explanation. After a few more turns they had reached an unremarkable door. There was a small plaque next to it labeled 'Doctor Richard Roberts.' Below this sign was another, a handwritten message, saying 'Call me Doctor Bob.' Noah had opened the door without hesitation and gestured for them to go through.

Now Jared and Wanda exchanged uncertain glances as they stood before the doorway. Just what was Melanie getting them in to? Wanda rolled her eyes, something she was doing much more often, and entered the office. Jared shook his head and followed after her.

The doctor's office turned out to be more of a laboratory. A wide bench stretched around the entire back of the room, and it was absolutely packed with equipment and tools. Much of it stuff Jared could not easily identify. And in all this mess, off to one corner sitting on a high stool was a darkly tanned middle-aged man working away on some type of device.

The man glanced up from his work and gave Noah and Tiny Waves a quizzical expression at the two new arrivals.

"Doctor Bob," Noah said with a tired smile, "this is Jared Howe and..." He then empathized Wanda's name, "...Wanderer. As in the one we've all been told about."

The doctor slowly pulled himself off his stool and rubbed his hand over his mouth. "My, my," he said as he stared at both Jared and Wanda in open wonderment. "I must say I am surprised to see you, Wanderer. Melanie feared you had died when Chicago was bombed."

Wanda regarded the Human doctor silently for a few seconds. "We were underground, trying to escape the Seekers when the starship impacted. Its shockwave caused the tunnels to start to collapse. I was lucky to get out. Not all those who were with me did."
Jared saw Noah turned very pale while Wanda told her story of escaping the destruction of Chicago. Healer Tiny Waves noticed as well, in fact, she was quick to go the man and put a reassuring hand on his back. Noah, still distressed, gave his head another hard shake and let out a depressed sigh.

"I-I'm sorry," he said to Wanda and Jared. "I should go." Before anyone could say anything else, Noah turned and practically ran from the room.

Jared was bewildered. There was something very odd about Noah. "What was that all about?"

Leaning back against his messy workbench, Doctor Bob folded his arms. "It's...complicated," he said slowly. "Noah has had some difficulties...Chiefly one of his biggest problems stems from a good deal of guilt."

"What does he feel guilty about?" asked Wanda. She too was just as confused by Noah's behavior and much of what she had seen since leaving the hospital's lobby.

There was reluctance in the doctor's response. He looked pointedly away as he answered. "Noah led the team who captured and reprogrammed your ships at LAX. Helped turn them into the weapons that wrecked the cities...and killed so many."

Jared was stunned by the admission. Next to him, Wanda openly flinched. Noah, for all intents and purposes, was a mass murder. Doctor Bob saw their shocked expressions and was quick with an offered defense. "Please," he pleaded, "you must understand that many of us had no idea the scale and scope of the Facility's plans. Noah and the others did not realize the level of destruction their actions would have. We were told we were fighting to free our people. We didn't know..." Shame filled the doctor's eyes, and deep lines cut through his tanned face in a wrinkled sadness. "Maybe...we just didn't want to know."

Wanda did not say anything. She was beginning to stare a hole in the floor, her face a mask. Impossible to read. But Jared mused softly, "You were part of the original rebellion. Not someone recovered later or an isolated survivor who came to the city after the Free Zone took over."

A little of bit of the sorrow on Bob's face retreated. His lips curled up a tiny amount. "In fact, I was the first to be brought back."

"Who were you before?" asked Wanda. "Who...used you as a host?"

"Healer Many Leaves."

"What did you do with him?" questioned Wanda. For the first time she looked up and held the doctor's gaze. Her faded anger was back.

Jared understood Wanda's worry about the fate of the Souls from the freed Humans in Los Angeles. From what little he had learned from Jodi's disastrous encounter with Jeremy, many of the Humans brought back had destroyed the Souls who once controlled them. Revenge for what the parasitical race had done to humanity. Even if they had not been killed, the Souls would have been put in cryotanks and added to the thousands held hostage downtown.

But Tina, who had remained silent while Bob had talked, now spoke up with an answer surprising both Jared and Wanda. "With our people, of course." Then looking a little puzzled, she added, "What did you think we did with him?"

Wanda's eyebrows knitted together so tightly in addled confusion it looked like there was a straight thin blonde line on her forehead. "Wait...Wait," she said slowly, as tried to make sense of Tina's
answer. Looking to Bob, she questioned him with genuine astonishment, "You mean you gave Many Leaves back to us?"

"Yes," replied the doctor with a simple nod of his head. Now he too joined in with the general confusion of everyone in the room and asked, "Did Melanie not explain this to you? What we're doing?"

"We didn't have a lot of time to talk," explained Jared. Deciding to go for broke, he recapped his attempt to break Melanie out of her prison at the Ritz and her refusal to leave.

His story brought a gentle laugh from Bob. "That does sound like Melanie. Stubborn enough to put a mule to shame." The doctor returned to leaning against his messy workbench. "Hmm," he deliberated. "Let me try to fill in some details for you." He paused, seemingly gathering his thoughts and Jared and Wanda waited expectantly.

"Most of us brought back," began Bob, "were furious about what had happened. The years lost. The violation of our bodies. Our loved ones suffering the same fate. All of humanity doomed to be the Souls' puppets. Fear, anger, and desperation make for a dangerous combination. Makes you willing to do things you would normally find unconscionable. And as I said, the Facility and most notably a one Craig Williams exploited that...willingness."

"After the starships fell, Williams told us we would build a new city. Where Humans wouldn't need to fear the Souls. Where we would be in charge. I think many of us were in shock over the destruction...I know I was. We didn't know what else to do. So, we agreed to his plan. As a former Healer I knew where the cryotanks were stored, how they operated, and most importantly how we could use them against you."

There was renewed shame in Bob's voice as he explained how he helped the Free Zone gain power by threatening the Souls. Of dumping out the still frozen silver bodies from cryotanks in front of the frightened aliens to force them to obey. He saw the torment he was causing, and at first tried to ignore it. But as the Humans began to triumph over the Souls and their rule over the alien population in the city grew cruel, his conscience began to weigh heavy on him. "I was a doctor...a man of healing...not a torturer," he whispered.

Bob stopped speaking and blinked back tears. Tina went to the human and drew into a big hug. "It is alright, my friend," she said gently. "You have saved so many more lives than you took."

Offering a weak nod of his head to the Soul, Bob continued. "I wanted...Well, to be honest, I didn't know what I wanted beyond stopping myself from turning into an even greater monster. I saw how others were beginning to enjoy the power they had."

Wanda had carefully followed Bob's story, but Jared noticed her eyes had fixed on a device sitting on the man's workbench. It was rough cylindrical in shape, with an intricate weaving of wiring and tubes all wrapped around a hollow center, roughly twice the size of his fist. Jared was certain the strange contraption looked familiar.

Confirming his suspicions, Wanda abruptly interrupted Bob. "That is Cryotank with its outer shell removed. What are doing to it?"

A small smile returned to the doctor's suntanned face. "A little adjustment to the indicator lights. Makes the cryotank look occupied when it really isn't." He saw the nonstop confusing frowns from both Jared and Wanda and his smile widened. "You see, I'm one of the few who has access to the storage sites where they are keeping all your people, Wanderer. Does the Free Zone no good to lose their hostages. They want those cryotanks in good working order. I'm responsible for their up
keep and maintenance. When the opportunity comes, I replace a few cryotanks in storage with my modified ones."

"And Bob then smuggles those out to me," finished Tina with a wide grin of her own. "In turn, I've developed a secret storage site for our rescued brethren. Far away from the Free Zone and any angry Humans."

Wanda's mouth was agape, stunned by the revelation. Jared was working through his own disbelief. "You've made, well, an underground railroad for the cryotanks held hostage."

"An excellent way to put it," replied Tina.

"But what has Melanie..." began Wanda.

"She helped orchestrate the whole thing. Melanie was the one who found me and put me in touch with Tina here," finished Bob as he put his arm around the Healer. "Gave me a purpose beyond being a...monster."

"As I said before," said Tina. "I was terrified of Melanie when I first met her. She and many of the other Free Zone leaders were touring the hospital. They and their guards were threatening any Soul who gave even a hint of defiance. I made the mistake of trying to defend one of my patients who had gotten in the way of one of the security men. I thought he was going to yank me out of my host on the spot." The Healer trembled at the memory. "Then Melanie began yelling at me. Telling me she was going to take care of me personally. I was so frightened. But...she was being deceitful with the other Humans. Making them believe she was on their side. When she got me alone, she began to cry. Saying how sorry she was for the way we were being treated. I didn't believe her at first. Then she started telling me about you, Wanderer. About your time together. It took time, but I slowly began to trust her."

"Everything Melanie is doing with the Free Zone is an act," said Jared with an amazed shake of his head.

"Yes," agreed Bob. "She's playing a dangerous game. In public, Melanie agrees with and supports the Free Zone. But in private, she helps us and our efforts to free the cryotanks and put an end to their tyranny. Very risky, but..." And here his expression turned cheerless as he continued, "this is not a time of safety or security."

Jared went silent, worried about Mel. She was indeed playing a dangerous game. If Craig Williams found out what she was doing...It could be very bad for everyone. He had bent an entire city to his will. The man's rage and resolve made him extremely dangerous.

"How many of you are there?" asked Wanda, breaking Jared out his anxious thoughts about this Human-Soul resistance Melanie had formed.

"Not many," answered Bob. "You've met Noah. A few other Humans are helping us where they can."

"Nor are there many of us," said Tina. "While there would be many who would help, most of us aren't good at lying." Rather self-depreciablely the Soul Healer sighed to herself. "I have learned how. But too many of us would do a poor job of hiding our activities from the Free Zone Humans. Deception for many of us just isn't one of our strengths."

"Not that I've got what it takes to be a spy master," added Bob. "But I do what I can. It's made easier as there are still few Humans in the city. Melanie, of course, helps as much as possible. She
supplies me with information about Cryotanks that are available for smuggling." The doctor stopped and tapped his finger against his chin. Giving both Wanda and Jared a thoughtful look, he added, "Did she give you anything? I'd planned on another retrieval."

Reaching into his pocket, Jared pulled out Melanie's note. Now her message made more sense. He had been the carrier for the information Bob needed. "I think this is what you're looking for."

The doctor's eyes lit up when he saw the thin slip of paper. "Yes, this is exactly it. Thank you for bringing it here. We have much work ahead of us to get ready for tonight."

"What's tonight?" asked Jared with a frown.

Bob waved Melanie's note in front of him. "A little bit of a jail break, so to speak."

Jared noted Bob and Tina were positively bouncing with feverish excitement. But it was Wanda's expression which caught his attention. The earlier irritated uncertainty was gone. Now her eyes were shiny, and she had a smile on her face. A real, genuine smile. Something he had not seen in weeks.

"Oh, Jared," she said as she blinked back a tear. "Melanie hasn't abandoned us. She's protecting my people. Even after everything she's been through, she still with us."

"Guess she is," sighed Jared. He could see Wanda's resolve already returning. She was going to stay here. Work to rescue the trapped Souls. Just like Melanie. Too damn stubborn. And Jared would as well. As much as he wanted to leave this nightmare of a city as fast as he could, he knew deep down there was no way he was going until Melanie was with him.

"I suppose you could use a hand?" he questioned Bob.

"Oh, yes," smiled the doctor. "The more, the merrier."

####

'You see I knew Dell before you Souls showed up. Him and me had crossed paths when we both went after this choice Corvette. Such a nice set of wheels' explained Marc. In his memories, he reminisced about the flashy expensive sports car. 'He had his crew with him. He had experience. The vet was good as his.' Wry amusement rose in Marc, 'And I was the punk white boy who stole it right from under his nose."

Pausing in his story, Marc waited for a reaction from Bright Moon. He did not get one. Bright Moon's mind was partially occupied with navigating through the woodland forest. The four Seekers were moving in a loose box formation slowly through the thick undergrowth. Seeker Justin and Sky Roost took the lead, while Second Sunrise and Bright Moon bringing up the rear.

Traveling through the brush and leafy vegetation was not a difficult task, it was something the Souls had done a good deal of in the last few weeks. Bright Moon's earlier joy at finding Marc had given way to an unhappy funk. Going through all the dark times since the bunker had left the Soul feeling depressed. Marc had taken it upon himself to cheer up Bright Moon with tales of his greatest heists. So far it had not gone well.

'Guess you already know this one,' said Marc after the silence went on for too long. 'I get the impression you've shifted through all my memories when you went looking for me.'
'Oh, yes,' came Bright Moon's morose reply. 'I've seen all the times you've stolen things. Stuff you didn't even need. You just wanted to prove you could take it, like the Corvette. And the times when you got into fights with anyone who crossed you. All the violence of your youth.' A little shudder went through the Soul.

'Yeah, I know I did a lot bad stuff,' admitted Marc. 'I was a stupid teenager with a big chip on my shoulder. I'm not trying to defend it. That just was the reality of my life growing up.'

'But you wear these memories like a badge of honor. It's strange,' pondered Bright Moon, 'you are sorry you did it, yet proud of your accomplishments.'

' Eh...it's a guy thing. You wouldn't understand.'

An ever so small sliver of humor made its way into Bright Moon's mood. 'Well, I am now.'

'What?'

'Male,' replied Bright Moon to Marc's puzzled inquiry. A little bit more humor grew in the Soul's mind. 'I'm in your body, after all. I take on the physical characteristics of my host. So now I am a guy.' There was a pause. 'However, I still don't get why you're pleased with having a successful criminal career.'

'You should always take pride in your abilities, even if they're illegal,' argued Marc. Then he drifted off, and the Soul could sense a growing confusion in Marc's mind.

'What is it?' asked Bright Moon.

Marc's reply was slow in coming. 'If you're male because you're in my body, then why do you...well...sound feminine to me?'

The question so surprised the Soul Bright Moon blurted out loud, "I do?" This garnered concerned looks from Seekers Justine and Second Sunrise.

"You do what?" asked Second Sunrise as the four Seekers slowed to start climbing up a hill.

"Umm...nothing," stammered Bright Moon as the Soul tried to cover up the verbal outburst. Internally, Bright Moon was still stunned by Marc's comment.

'See it's weird when you speak out loud. I hear my voice. But when it's just the two of us talking, you sound different,' offered Marc in way of explanation. Another pause went by and Marc brought up another question. 'I know it's kind of a private thing with Souls, so I didn't want to bring it up before. But are you a Soul female? Capable of motherhood? Is that why I hear you as a woman?'

'No,' said Bright Moon after a moment. 'I'm not a mother. That's not my privilege. But even if I were, it wouldn't make a difference in my host body. I'm male if I'm in a man's body. Female if I'm a woman's. That is the way it is for all Souls, regardless if they are capable of motherhood. I know some of us prefer one gender over another. But it's usually a personal choice.'

'What did you choose?' asked Marc.

'As a Bear I was twice female and once male. I didn't specify when I came to Earth. The difference never seemed that important to me. Putting me in Julia was mostly random chance.' Thinking on the subject, Bright Moon questioned Marc. 'Would have you felt the same for me if I had a body of a different woman? Or had come as a man?'
Marc felt more than a little stupid for not even considering the possibility. He knew better than many about the Souls' ability to move from body to body. 'I don't know,' he finally admitted. 'I guess it's not easy for me to think in that way. Can't see you as another woman.' Then with an equivalent of a mental laugh, he added, 'You as a man? Unfortunately, I don't swing that way.'

'So, your attraction to me was purely physical?'

'No...At least I don't think so. When Sage of Tides took over your host body, everything he did just seemed off...Wrong in the body. I knew almost immediately it wasn't you. You are you. I don't quite know how else to articulate it. Part of me sees you as a woman. No matter what body you're in.' Marc pondered further. 'I suppose that's sort of sexist...or even racist. But I don't know how else to make sense of it. Maybe that's just a limitation of being Human. Only able to think in terms of male or female.'

Bright Moon pushed a little on Marc's thoughts. Wanting to see deeper into his mental state and how he saw the Soul. At first, Marc resisted, not liking the intrusion. But he acquiesced upon feeling Bright Moon's desire to understand. The Soul shifted through his mind like a gentle hand moving across a still pond of water. Feeling the texture of his thoughts. Improbably, both found the experience oddly intimate.

'You don't want to think of me as an It. As a thing that is genderless,' said Bright Moon. 'You see it as derogatory. Even if the term is accurate in my case. Strange. Body and Soul. These are two separate concepts to us. And yet...You mesh them together as one for me. You see me as a...person.'

Bright Moon found Marc's notion rather touching. The Soul reflected upon itself. Himself. Herself. Identity for a Soul could be rather fluid and flexible. But not so much for a Human. Marc was only making sense of their strange situation as best he could.

'I guess it is a bit of a limitation,' judged Bright Moon. 'But then again, humanity's concepts of masculinity and femininity aren't purely driven by biology. I suppose I don't mind you thinking of me as a female.'

'Really?' asked a surprised Marc.

Bright Moon's mood, which had been dejected and unhappy began to improve. 'In your crazy mind,' replied the Soul, 'I'll take what I can get.'

'Good thing you're not a Dolphin,' added Bright Moon, thinking about the alien species on that faraway planet. 'They have three district genders. It would be even more confusing.'

'It takes three to tango for the Dolphins? Crazy.'

'It's a strange universe, Marc. Sometimes you've just go to roll with it.'

'That sounds like something I would say,' laughed Marc.

'As I said, I take on some of the traits of my host. Which is you. I've gotten to know you very well, Mister Walters.'

Marc could hear the smile in Bright Moon's words. He replied with some sardonic humor of his own. 'Did you now? What do you think of being me?'

Bright Moon considered for a long time and answered with a sobering reply. 'I guess I find it very different and difficult. But I'm not sure your body is the best example of being a male human.'
'Hey!' 

'Oh...that didn't come out right. I mean I'm in you, Marc. And I've found that very...disturbing. Still do. Changing bodies can be jarring for us. And I think your little insertions was likely one of the most traumatizing events of all of my lives.'

'I'm sorry,' whispered Marc tenderly. 'But I just couldn't let you die. Not when there was something I could do.'

A warmth spread through Bright Moon. 'I am grateful. You love me. The little silver worm you held in your hand. It's beautiful...'

Marc and Bright Moon then drifted together and the pull of happier times drew them away from their unpleasant surroundings. Memories of Marc and Bright Moon sharing their first kiss on the roof of the Hotel Rose entered their shared mind. It was more than just the touch of their lips together. The smell of Bright Moon's hair. The sounds of Marc's soft sigh as they pulled together. The feel of his hands on her body.

Their thoughts blurred together, and their memories became twisted. He/She ran a hand through her/his hair. Their kiss deepened and his/her mouth opened with a soft moan...Abruptly Bright Moon broke away from Marc. The Soul stopped walking and shifted uncomfortably as cheeks reddened in embarrassment.

'I...uhhh...this is so...umm,' spluttered Bright Moon.

Similarly affected, Marc retreated in their shared mind. 'Okay...Yeah...Let's not do that again. It got weird fast...'

Upon seeing Bright Moon coming to an abrupt halt, Seeker Justin stopped as well and asked, "Is there a problem?"

"I...err...well...," stuttered Bright Moon as the Soul's emotions spilled over into outright mortification. In an almost unfocused daze, Bright Moon spun around and took in the surroundings. The dark green canopy of the forest partially obscured the noon day sun. Not the busy city of Chicago with the ever-present rumble of traffic. Instead, bird song and the rustle of leaves in the wind.

Bright Moon's reaction only severed to increase the others concern. "Seeker Bright Moon, you have been very distracted today," observed Sky Roost. The ruddy faced Seeker scrutinized Bright Moon "I know you have not slept well in many days. You continue to have problems with your host. Usually, I would ask you to see a Comforter. But our situation is hardly normal. We cannot afford to be distracted. The Humans hunting us are determined and resourceful."

Sky Roost's admonishment caused Bright Moon further embarrassment. Head hanging low in shame, Bright Moon muttered. "I apologize. I am sorry I've been so distracted."

"Are these distractions coming from your search for Marc Walter?" asked Second Sunrise. "I know you continue to look. But can you really afford to do so?"

'You might as well just tell them,' said Marc. 'Whether the other Seekers like me or not, we're pretty much attached at the hip. They can't get rid of me without getting rid of you.'

Indecision weighted on Bright Moon. 'I don't know. What if they consider you a threat? Worry that you will try to betray us?'
'I'm in this mess just as much as the rest of you. Hell, maybe I can help. You guys could use a Human on your side. Not that I can do much.'

"Bright Moon!" snapped Sky Roost, yanking the Soul's attention away from Marc and their internal conversation. "What is wrong with you?"

Sighing, Bright Moon answered Second Sunrise's questions. "It is about Marc. And, no I won't need to look for him anymore."

"You have given up on this endeavor?" queried Seeker Justin. "It seemed a rather pointless task."

With a small grin Marc would have given himself if he could, Bright Moon replied to the soon to be stunned Seekers. "I don't need to look for him anymore because I already found him."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter- While Bright Moon and Marc try to out maneuver the Facility's forces, Jared and Wanda go on a mission to rescue some of the captured cryotanks and learn something surprising about Noah.
The hot, humid breeze swept through the tall trees of the forest. Strong enough to make the upper branches sway back and forth in the gust of air. The rustle of leaves made a sound like an exhale of a giant pent-up breath. Like the whole forest was softly sighing. Lower to the ground the same wind had a much weaker effect. The thick underbrush barely stirred. Just enough to give a light toss of Bright Moon on Fallen Snow's sweat soaked hair. In the sticky air, it did little to counter the sweltering heat.

In an attempt to cool down, Bright Moon shifted into the shadow of a large tree and laid back against its trunk. The tree was a maple, tall and firm. Its rough bark pressed into Bright Moon's back. The shade it gave was greater than the surrounding brushwood. Not much though, perspiration still beaded up on Bright Moon's face from the overhead sun. A semi-startled sound came from nearby. Seeker Justin had laid crouched in the undergrowth, watching the adjacent logging road for activity. His big body so still and entirely focused, that Bright Moon's move jolted him out of his careful observations.

"Sorry," muttered Bright Moon as he ran a hand across his forehead and wiped some sweat away.

Justin shook his head. "It is alright. I can no longer remain watching." With his large hands, he pushed off against the ground, bring himself up into a kneeling position. He gave a quick roll of his shoulders and moved his head back and forth to work out a kink out of his neck.

Making a small nod towards the nearby road, he said, "There is no sign of any trucks on this path or indication any have recently come this way."

Bright Moon wearily sighed. "But we did hear vehicles of some sort earlier in the morning. They must be close."

"I agree, but they did not come this way, that much I am certain," replied Justin as he slowly got up from his kneeling position. "This heat is becoming truly bothersome," he added as he joined Bright Moon under the shade of the maple tree. He too was profusely sweating.

Bright Moon was working hard to think about something other than the thirst that had been building since this morning. As usual, the attempt to not think about something only made the thought of water more stubbornly lodged in the mind.

Running his hand across the bark of the tree, Justin echoed a similar desire, "Some water would be very much appreciated. I remember you can draw sap from certain trees like this." He saw Bright Moon's quizzical expression and elaborated. "Sap is mostly water with a little bit of sugar."

"What is required to extract the sap?" asked Bright Moon.

Justin slowly nodded. "You need to drill into the tree with an auger, about an inch. Then insert a small tube to let the sap trickle out. I know it can be done during early spring. I'm not as certain how much can be extracted during the summer. But it might be worth trying if we fail to find any water."

"It could be," replied Bright Moon. Looking around at the many solid tree trunks spreading about them, Bright Moon wondered how many trees would be needed to collect enough sap. Curiosity
bubbled up in the Soul. Justin spoke very little about himself. There was always such a grim
demeanor about the big Seeker's body to put off most from asking him.

Hoping to draw Justin out, even if it was on such a mundane topic, Bright Moon asked, "How do
you know about this?"

Justin did not at once answer. He gazed off into space for a while. "My host grew up in rural
Pennsylvania," he finally said. "Mostly farms and small woodland areas. One of the activities he
carried out with his family would be the collecting of the sap from maple trees like this one when
the snow began to melt." He ran a hand against the maple tree's back. "Then they would boil it
down to produce Maple Syrup."

'Huh,' thought Marc absently in Bright Moon's mind. 'Here I always believed Maple Syrup came
from Mrs. Butterworth's bottles.'

Feeling a little exasperated from Marc's interruption and the sweltering temperature, Bright Moon
mentally grumbled, 'Really Marc, even I knew Maple Syrup comes from trees, and I'm an alien.'

'Are you seriously going to berate me for my lack of knowledge about the intricacies of breakfast
condiments production?'

'No...Sorry. I'm just hot and tired. And I really want something to drink.'

Marc gave the emotional equivalent of a light hug to Bright Moon. There was no physical
sensation, just the feeling of enthusiastic encouragement. 'I know...I feel everything you do, hon.
I'm just trying to keep your spirits up.'

Justin's voice broke them out of their internal conversation. "You're talking to Marc Walters, aren't
you?"

Bright Moon looked over to the other Soul to see Justin guardedly securitizing him. Since revealing
Marc's mind had returned, there had been distance from the other Seekers. It was not outright
suspicion, but nor was it casual acceptance. Bright Moon had explained Marc had no control over
his body and was little more than a voice in Bright Moon's mind. The Soul had hoped this would
put the others at ease, yet none were comforted by the information. There had even been a
reluctance to send Bright Moon with Justin to investigate the sound of engines rumbling through
the forest not long after daybreak. But with only four of them left, and Second Sunrise and Sky
Roost needing to find a source of drinkable water, Bright Moon was reluctantly allowed to go with
Justin to investigate. So far, they had seen no signs of Humans in the area. It was possible the
vehicles had merely passed through on the road without stopping.

Seeing there was no point in trying to be deceptive and still hoping to have the other Seekers accept
Marc's returned, Bright Moon replied with a simple nod.

Justin went silent again. Bright Moon was just about ready to suggest they head back when Justin
asked softly, "What is it like?"

"What? You mean having Marc in my head?"

"Yes."

A bit surprised by the question, Bright Moon took a moment to think through the answer. "Well...I
wanted to find him. So, I'm happy he's here. And while Marc wishes he could have control of his
body back, he prefers his current disembodied state to the near non-existence I found him in. It's a
little...strange, but not unpleasant."
"What does he do? What do you talk about?"

"He's well…Marc has taken it upon himself to cheer me up." Bright Moon gave a slight shrug at Justin's confused frown. "There's not much for else for him to do, so he's trying to help keep me in a good mood. Tells me jokes and stories from his past."

'Yeah, but you don't laugh,' put in Marc.

'Regaling me with stories of your greatest thefts isn't funny,' countered Bright Moon.

Without any way to hear their conversation, Justin's big round face twisting into a slight scowl as he threw up new questions. "What does Marc think about his people's return to power? Is happy about it? Gleeful in our destruction?"

'I swear you Souls have some sort of persecution complex, always assuming the worst in other people,' complained Marc. 'Is it so hard to believe I don't want to see anyone killed?'

'I know, Marc. I believe you. It's just the others have been through a lot. They're still distrustful of you."

'Well, they need to get over it. We're all stuck in this mess together."

'It's not that simple,' defended Bright Moon. 'We've all seen so many of our kind chased and killed by the Humans. It's not that easy to let that go."

'Is it any different from me watching my kind hunted down by the Seekers?" Marc's rebuke was not intentionally cruel, but his words still stung. Bright Moon let out a lamented sigh.

Justin's frown remained fixed to his face, but his eyes turned quizzical. Bright Moon had gained a faraway look that Justin was coming to associate with his fellow Soul speaking to his host body. "What's he saying?"

"Marc is annoyed you automatically presume he wants violence. He points out the fact that if he can see past our actions against his people, we should be able to do the same."

"That's totally different…" began Justin, but all of a sudden he went very still and his jaw clamped shut. Confused by Justin's behavior, Bright Moon was about to ask what was wrong when the big man held up his hand. In a low hush, he said, "Do you hear something?"

Bright Moon listened and heard the usual sounds of the forest - birds chipping, rustle of two squirrels racing across a nearby tree branch, the rustle of leaves high above. And then voices… indistinct yet most assuredly unfamiliar. They were coming from further up the dirt road, just out of sight for Bright Moon and Justin. But as they listened, the words from the unknown speakers grew clearer. Coming closer.

"Hide," whispered Bright Moon.

Both Seekers dropped to the ground and began crawling away from the tree they were shading themselves. Pulling themselves deeper into the underbrush and the covering foliage to keep concealed. The dirt road was only a narrow path in the thick woods and Bright Moon and Justin did not have to go far until the forest swallowed them completely.

In their hiding spot, they looked upon the old logging trail. Unobstructed by trees, the overhead sun lit up the dry, dusty road. Casting the dirt in a yellowish hue. The voices grew louder. Neither Bright Moon or Justin had a full view of the path, and they could not see who was talking. Yet
soon they could understand the unknown person's words as they neared.

It turned out there was more than one speaker. Two distinct voices rose and fell as they closed on Bright Moon and Justin.

"Detroit is a damn mess," said the first. A woman. "We were supposed to take the city in three weeks. We did it in three days."

The second voice answered. It belonged to an older man with a thick foreign accent. "Well, that is good. Ahead of schedule."

"No, it's not," snapped the woman in reply. "We were supposed to establish hospitals to help with recovering the city's population. Give people a chance to get back on their feet. But the buggers' defensive line fell so fast we were all the way through before we knew it. Now we have a ton of confused and panicky civilians on our hands. The city is in chaos."

"Ah, you worry too much, Joan," said the man. "We will get it figured out."

Then a third voice joined in, from the sound of the speaker it belonged to a younger man. "Not while we're running around these woods, Olav," In an irritated grumble, he added, "This whole thing is a waste of time."

From where they lay on the ground, Bright Moon and Justin saw three figures gradually walk into view. All of them outfitted in full military gear. Bulky grey-green body armor fitted with a dozen pouches, each one filled with ammunition clips and other devices and equipment. One man bore what looked like a sophisticated radio receiver strapped to his back. And each one carried a very deadly looking rifle. Their uniforms were a random assortment of colors of greens, browns, and greys. The camouflage would blend them in well if they were in the middle of the forest. But none of them seemed overly concerned with stealth. Walking down the middle of the dirt road, kicking up little clouds of dust, they easily stood out. Each one talking loud enough that their voices carried to the two hidden Seekers.

"You don't have to tell me," said the woman named Joan. It was not easy to identify her between the two other men. Their faces partially obscured by combat helmets. Only her voice gave her away. And to Bright Moon's ears, her tone was vaguely familiar.

As the three humans neared the hidden Seekers, they slowed. The Bright Moon barely breathed. They were less ten feet from their hiding spot. Joan turned to face the other two. As she did, Justin let out a strangled gasp. Bright Moon eyes widened in horror and froze as the soldiers stopped less than five feet from where they lay crouched in the underbrush.

'What's got Justin in a tizzy?' asked Marc.

'I'm not sure,' replied Bright Moon. 'He may know this Joan...or who she used to be.'

'She used to be a Seeker?' questioned Marc as Joan was now so close to readily see her human eyes. 'The CURE stuff do that?'

'Quite possible.'

'Damn...The Facility really has done it,' replied a dumbfounded Marc as they watched the former Seeker talk. 'Found the ultimate weapon against you Souls.'

'Shhh...’ pushed back Bright Moon. 'I want to hear what they're saying.'
"I'm telling you," said Joan, "these 'Facility' scientists are seriously screwed up. We shouldn't trust them."

"Why?" asked Olav. "If not for them we would not be here."

"Eh," grunted the unknown third man. "Trust them or not, I can't stand that Neil Lenson. The guy is a serious asshole."

"It's not just Lenson," clarified Joan. Her voice turned to a haunted whisper, and Bright Moon had to strain to hear. "When...It was in my head...It saw things. Stuff the 'Facility' did. Sick, twisted things."

"No one is saying they are nice people, Joan" countered Olav. "They surely had to make some hard choices when fighting the parasites. Do horrible things to survive. We all had to. But we need them."

Joan made an uncertain shrug. In her bulky uniform, it was only a minor movement of her shoulders and then she began walking again. The other two men followed. "Maybe we do need them," she admitted. "Still doesn't mean we should trust them."

As the three humans continued to argue among themselves, their voices began to fade as they continued down the road. Snippets of conversation still floated in as Joan, Olav, and the other man moved away. Their voices mixing together. "...don't understand why...Who knows...been two weeks...All this work just to find one guy..." Soon there was nothing but the sounds of the forest.

Bright Moon breathed a sigh of relief. Justin did as well. If the humans had come a few steps closer, they would have spotted the two Seekers. Slowly, very slowly, Seeker Justin raised up onto his knees and leaned forward to get a better look at the road. He panned his head back and forth, carefully watching for any signs the humans were doubling back.

"I believe they're gone," he said after a few minutes' ticket by.

Pushing off the ground, Bright Moon took a tentative step closer to the road. Boot footprints were easy to see on the dry earth. Both Marc's and Bright Moon's minds were spinning from what they had overheard. But in two very different directions. Marc wanted to follow. To listen and learn more. Bright Moon wanted to hurry back to the others.

'Come on,' urged Marc as he tried to mental push their body forward to no avail. 'We need to find out what they're up to!'

'Hunting us, obviously!' countered Bright Moon.

'Well, they're doing a crappy job of it. None of them are paying much attention.' Marc latched on to a new idea. 'With big old Justin helping, we might even get the drop on them.'

'You're insane. They have guns. A radio. For all we know, they're acting as bait to draw us out. We need to warn Second Sunrise and Sky Roost the Humans are close.'

Justin soon confirmed Bright Moon's viewpoint when he said in a grave voice, "The others must be told what we've seen and heard."

"Yes," agreed a strident Bright Moon and stepped back into the thicker forest.

'You're making a mistake,' declared Marc.
In a fierce, angry thought, Bright Moon shot back, 'I have been the one running and outmaneuvering these Humans for weeks. You've been back less than two days, and yet you think you know best. We need to withdraw from here before more come.'

'Fine. Do what you want. Not like I can really stop you,' sulked Marc.

Frustrated with Marc's urging for his irrational plan and renewed concern of the searching soldiers, Bright Moon let out a weary sigh. A silence stretched out as Bright Moon and Justin began to make their way back to the Seekers' encampment. Both Seekers preoccupied with moving through the dense underbrush. It went on long enough that when Justin did speak, it almost startled the preoccupied Bright Moon.

"I knew her…that Joan. Or more accurately when she was Seeker Amber Rains," he said in a low grumble of a voice.

"I see," replied Bright Moon at the realization of why Justin had reacted when seeing the former Seeker. After looking back to a time before this nightmare started, Bright Moon added, "I think I did as well. I met her when Marc and I traveled to Sawyer Airport. But I didn't know what happened to her after the bombing."

"She was in my division at Iron Mountain. She and many others were…taken," explained Justin.

"I'm sorry," offered Bright Moon. There was not much else to say.

Marc, who had been fuming in the back of Bright Moon's head over their latest argument, whispered softly, 'Amber Rains is dead, isn't she?'

'Very likely. These Humans aren't interested in using Cryotanks. Our disposal seems their only goal. The only strange thing we've noticed is they don't remove us right away. We're left in their bodies for up to a week.'

'Why?' asked a perplexed Marc.

'We don't know. These recovered Humans often confuse us. From what little we've been able to observe there doesn't always seem to be a clear agenda in their actions.'

Marc pondered Bright Moon's answer for a bit. He then replayed the overheard conversation and came to a realization. 'You're thinking like a Soul, Bright Moon. All unified and cooperative like a good little bugger. But that's not us Humans. We're an unruly lot. Different factions are forming with these recovered Humans. Not everyone agrees on how to proceed.'

'Maybe. But they are united in our destruction.'

'Too bad we didn't hear more of their conversation,' considered Marc. 'That Joan seems to be genuinely upset with the Facility. I would like to learn more.'

Bright Moon sighed. 'For the last time, we are not going after them.'

'Yes, ma'am,' lightly teased Marc.

Another exasperated sigh escaped Bright Moon, this one got Justin's attention. "What is it?" he asked.

"Marc wanted us to follow the Humans," began Bright Moon. "To find out what they were up to. More specifically to listen to Amber Rains former host. He believes she is bothered by the
Facility's actions. He thinks the Humans may becoming fractious."

Elaborating, Bright Moon added, "I'm arguing with him. I don't think it's a wise course of action to follow after them."

Justin did not reply right away. His face became closed off as he mulled over Marc's ideas. "I agree, following the Humans is too dangerous," he said finally. "But…Marc might be right. I was thinking that it was unlikely the Humans were playing at a ruse for us. There is little point to such subterfuge. We should treat their conversation as genuine."

"I'm not sure that helps us," replied Bright Moon.

"It might not," agreed Justin. "But we have learned something. They are not happy being here. From their discussion, these Humans consider this pursuit a waste of time. If we can avoid them for a little while longer, they may give up the chase."

They began descending into a narrow glen, and the space between surrounding tree trunks shrank. The scorching sun above was cut off as the tangle of branches and leaves of the trees thickened. Bright Moon and Justin rested for a minute in the cool shade.

Returning to Justin's theory, Bright Moon said, "We had thought this before. That the Humans would give up. But they just keep coming." The Soul could not keep the bitterness out his voice in his last words.

'What do they want with you guys?' thought Marc. 'I mean why would the Facility go through all this effort, just for the four of you?'

'I don't know,' replied Bright Moon sullenly. 'There's nothing we have. We've been out of touch with the other Seekers for over a month. No piece of strategy or information we know could possibly still be relevant.'

Marc replayed Joan and the others conversation again, letting his mind wander through their words. He did it once, twice, then three times in a row. Each time touching every part of the memory. It was becoming annoying to Bright Moon, but the Soul ignored it as the two Seekers resumed their walk back to their hiding spot.

On the sixth time through, Marc abruptly shouted, 'THAT'S IT!'

Wincing at his yelling, Bright Moon again grew irritated. 'What?'

'They're not after you...I mean not the Seekers. Not you Souls. They want the bodies back. The Humans. That's what's important to them.'

'Well…' and Bright Moon used a word that Marc had never heard a Soul use before. '…Duh! Of course they want your kind back. And they want us Souls dead. I thought we had already established that!'

'Don't get snippy,' grated Marc. 'Let me explain. When they were just getting out of earshot we heard one of them say – "All this work just to find one guy."'

'So?'

'One guy is the key. Not plural. They're looking for one person. And they didn't say a bugger, or worn, or parasite. Got to think of it from our perspective. When they say a guy…they mean a Human. That's what these soldiers are after.'
'That's...a bit of stretch over a few words from a barely heard dialog.'

Yet Marc stuck to his speculation and let his mind drift in endless speculation. 'If the Facility can bring back any host with their black smoke stuff, then they might go after someone important. Say a host who used to be a leader or a general. Maybe they need someone who can provide unity for all the newly awakened people.' Marc paused and then asked, 'Who are the other Seekers' hosts?'

'I could not really say,' said Bright Moon. 'Justin had spoken about his host growing up on a farm. I don't think any of our bodies were that important in your world.'

'I can tell when you're speaking with Marc Walters,' announced Justin, pulling Bright Moon's attention away from their internal argument. "You become distracted, Bright Moon," continued Justin. "Your eyes are unfocused. Not the wisest idea to be speaking with your host when we need to concentration on our environment."

Reddening in embarrassment from Justin's chiding, Bright Moon muttered, "It will not happen again." To Marc, Bright Moon mentally pressed on him, pushing him back into their shared mind. 'Now, be quiet.'

'Damn it, this is important. Ask Justin. Maybe he knows about Second Sunrise and Sky Hoots hosts.'

'It's Sky Roost…'

'Like it matters…'

A large hand pressed against Bright Moon's chest, stopping him from moving. Startled, Bright Moon looked to Justin as the other Seeker held them back. A deeper frown formed on Justin's face. "This is becoming worrisome, Bright Moon," he said. "Marc Walters is obviously affecting you. Causing you far too much disruption. What is he saying that brings such distractions?"

Bright Moon let out a tired sigh and began to go over Marc's scant evidence for his theory of why the Humans pursued the four of them. Of how the Human hosts might be more important than the Souls themselves. When he finished, Bright Moon grumbled, "It's a silly idea."

"No," said Justin with a slow shake of his head, "it's not." With soft wonder, as if finding the idea he once again agreeing with a Human too strange, he said, "I concur with Marc."

Stunned, Bright Moon and Marc both blurted out, "You do?" Taking a moment to collect themselves at their joined outburst, Bright Moon then continued, "But it makes no sense. None of the four of us have hosts that would be important to the Facility."

"But there is one," countered Justin. His normal grave manner had deepened into an exceptionally solemn face, with deep lines of worry. "A human who was responsible for countering the Facility's plague. For defeating their agents. For freely joining a Seeker task force sent to destroy them."

As Justin spoke, both Bright Moon and Marc felt a cold chill run down their spine.

Again, Justin nodded his big head on his broad shoulders. "Yes," he pronounced ominously, "the Facility is hunting for Marc Walters."
"Tina should be here shortly," said Noah as he opened the rear door on the van.

"So...we just wait here for her?" asked Wanda as she looked about. It was a sunny, cloudless day, with a warm breeze coming from the south. They were parked near old abandoned warehouses on the east side of the city. The decaying buildings had not been occupied for a long time. Nearly two dozen of the timeworn squat brick buildings lay spread out with narrow alleyways between them. At this point, they were little more than shells of crumbling walls and broken windows. No one else, Human or Soul, was around. This isolated and barren place was the chosen spot for their handoff.

It made sense, considered Wanda. No prying eyes, no armed Free Zone guards, the distinct lack of any regular traffic left the surrounding area unusually quiet. They could hear anyone approaching. But the unnatural silence left Wanda feeling edgy.

"Yeah," replied Noah with a short nod of his head. "There should be no one else around here. We can then be sure we weren't followed. If it gets hinky for any reason, we can get out of here in a hurry."

Wanda noted the man looked a good deal better than when she had met him yesterday. He had shaved, and the dark circles under his eyes had retreated. Apparently, he had finally gotten a good night's sleep. Even though his appearance had improved, Wanda could readily see Noah still carried an oppressive weight of guilt with him. She had seen him more than once gazing off into the distance, with unfocused eyes, troubled with unspoken thoughts.

It was only natural, she supposed. Noah's actions had led to the death of millions. For a dark, idle moment, she wondered if he had reprogrammed the spaceship which had hit Chicago. But Wanda pushed the thought away. This was neither the time nor place to dwell on that terrible moment. They had much more pressing issues at hand, and Noah was genuinely trying to make amends.

The evidence of Noah's atonement lay inside a secret compartment in the cargo area of the van. Anyone looking inside would see carefully stacked boxes of medical equipment. But hidden under these containers lay twelve cryotanks. Spoils from Bob's and Jared's raid last night on a Free Zone's storage site. Soon Healer Tina would arrive to take the silver cylinders to her hidden storage site. Freeing them - and the sleeping Souls inside - from the threat of the Los Angeles Free Zone. All part of Melanie's secret underground railroad.

Trying to settle her nerves, Wanda turned to face Noah and gave him a soft smile. "Thank you for doing this."

He looked down at the ground, a little embarrassed. "It's really nothing. I just drive the van past the security checkpoints. No real risk for me."

"That's not true," she argued. Wanda felt a rise of distress at what the other Humans would do to Noah if they found out. Beating him, hurting him, just for helping a few Souls escape their wrath. "If the Free Zone discovered you smuggling out cryotanks, you would be in considerable danger. Other Humans would...force you to tell them about the underground railroad."

"I've heard it all before. And yeah...It wouldn't be good to get caught." Noah looked off into the distance. "So, let's not get caught."

"Agreed," nodded Wanda.

They drifted into silence, both scanning the incoming street for any sign of the Healer. After a few more minutes Wanda heard the low drone of an engine. Looking around she hunted for its source.
A quick glance showed Noah had caught the noise as well.

"Is it Tina?" questioned Wanda.

Noah's face pinched tight with concern. "I don't know. Doesn't sound like the truck she normally brings."

Tension began to build in Wanda's body. Even after all this time, Petals Open to the Moon's original host could still get so jumpy. It annoyed Wanda to no end. She bit her lip, trying to force down the growing jitters in her midsection. Something was not right here, and she needed her mind and body focused.

The sound came again, the purr of a motor idling. She turned towards it and caught a brief slight in a gap between two warehouse buildings. Of a black and white colored vehicle. It was sleek and low to the ground. Built for pursuit. A patrol car. At one time, such a sight would have meant Seekers. But there were no Seekers in the city. Now a police cruiser signified something far more dangerous.

Wanda felt the blood draining from her face. Spinning around, she saw Noah had seen the same thing. His expression mirrored hers. "Damn, damn, damn," he groaned. "They must have already been here because they sure didn't come in from the street, we would have seen them."

"They were expecting us?" questioned Wanda. But that did not make much sense. If the Free Zone had caught on to Melanie's plans, they would have come in force. Not just send a single vehicle. Shaking her head at her own question, she amended, "They might be patrolling the area. Not looking for anything specific."

"Could be…" conceded Noah, but he drifted off as the engine noise of the patrol car grew louder. They were drawing closer.

Wanda guessed the police car was going up and down the narrow alleyways. Slowly making their way to their location. Were they hunting? Looking for the van, or merely making the rounds?

"Do we run?" she half whispered to Noah. "If they see us leave, they could get suspicious."

"I think they'll get pretty suspicious if they find us here. A human, a soul, and a bunch of cryotanks," rejoined Noah. Then he frowned most peculiarly. He looked off to the left, and his eyes drifted down. It was as if he was listening to someone else. Then he said, "If it was just Souls… Souls don't lie… Maybe they would buy it…"

All Wanda could say was - "Huh?"

But Noah did answer her, his eyes were unfocused, his attention somewhere else. The sound of the approaching police cruiser rose in pitch. Wanda could hear its wheels running over the uneven asphalt of the alley as it approached. They were running out of time.

Grabbing Noah's arm, Wanda shook the human. "Noah, we need to go or hide. Now!"

His focused and looked down at her. "No," he said with a quick shake of his head. "Not enough time to hide. But we've got a plan."

Wanda felt herself go dizzy from disbelief. "We do!?"

"Yes," insisted Noah. "Get back in the van."
"But…" she protested.

"Do it, Wanda," he ordered. "Security forces already have a description of you. We need to keep you out of sight as much as possible."

With the patrol car almost on them, Wanda reluctantly returned to the van's passenger seat. As she did, Noah quickly added, "There's a map in the glovebox, get it for me."

She found the folded map easily enough and handed over to Noah. "What are you going to do?"

A ghost of a smile edged Noah's lips upward. "You'll see, just try not to freak out too much."

He turned from her and began to walk to the front of the van. As he did, Wanda saw him freeze for a moment, and little shudder go through his body. A rapid contraction and then relaxing of all the muscles in his body. And Wanda's eyes went wide. There was only one other person she had ever seen do anything like that - Jodi.

Then there was no more time for Wanda to ponder this latest impossibility. For at that moment, the patrol car turned onto their road. They were parked right in the middle alleyway. Impossible to miss. Within seconds the cruiser sped up and began to close the distance to the van. Flashing lights flicked on as it approached.

The patrol car came to an abrupt halt, only a mere few feet from where Noah stood in front of the van. He was waiting as they approached. His shoulders were slumped, his head bowed, looking down at the unfolded map.

A security officer swiftly got out of the passenger side of the police cruiser. He was dressed in the typical black body armor Wanda had seen the Free Zone militia use at their checkpoints. He also carried the oversized assault rifle. A far more excessive weapon than one would normally need. Taking only a few steps towards Noah, the officer stopped and growled out, "What are you doing here worm?"

"I-I'm sorry," stammered Noah. "You see…I'm a bit lost."

To Wanda, his voice was both familiar and not. Softer and gentler than Noah's usual tone. Subdued and frightened.

"What's your name?" questioned the Human.

Looking at his shoes, Noah replied, "Evaluator of Samples."

"Christ that's a mouthful," sneered the man. "You got your papers on you?"

"Yes," said Noah.

Noah began reaching into his back pocket, and the security officer froze. His assault rifle came up. "Slow down," he shouted. "I want to see your hands move real slow."

"Y-Y-Yes," whimpered Noah as his whole body began to shake.

"Yesterday I actually had one of you assholes try to pull a weapon on me. Imagine that. You spineless things trying to fight back. That worm had to be taught a real hard lesson."

"B-But I don't have a weapon," blubbered Noah as he very slowly pulled out his identification papers.
The officer yanked the papers from Noah's trembling hand. He looked them over. "Assigned to Cedars-Sinai Center. What are you doing out here?"

"Transporting some medical supplies to the local Healing Center," whispered Noah. "Like I said, I got lost."

"Haven't you heard of a damn GPS?"

"We're not allowed…umm…cell phones…It's against the rules…"

The officer stepped up to Noah. Got right in his face and yelled, "Are you mouthing off to me, boy!?"

Noah jerked away, trying to put distance between himself and the angry human. His footing was unsteady, and the officer took advantage by giving him a firm shove. Sending Noah to ground with a hard thump.

"Pathetic," growled the man as he glared down at Noah, who was now cowering on the ground.

Alarmed for Noah's safety, Wanda gripped the van's door handle. Ready to push open the door and rush to his help, but she stopped herself. Noah had put himself directly between herself the cruiser. And the officer's attention was entirely on him. He was acting as a shield for her.

"Arnold," called a voice from behind the officer. His partner who had remained in the police car was speaking. "We've got 10-33 coming in from dispatch. Stop poking at that bugger and let's go."

At hearing his colleague's instruction, 'Arnold' let out an irritated sigh. His eyes moved from where Noah lay on the ground, to the van. Wanda froze as the officer looked at her. But his eyes quickly moved on. Wanda could tell in Arnold's mind that she and Noah were just buggers. Weak and pitiful. Hardly worth his time. They could be ignored without worry.

"Alright," announced Arnold to Noah. "You're getting off with a warning." And with that, he promptly kicked Noah in the stomach. Noah let out a agonized cry while Arnold confidently strolled back to the waiting patrol car. He got in, and the cruiser's engine roared. There was a squeal of tires, then the car surged forward and raced past the van.

As soon as they were gone, Wanda shoved open the van's door and raced over to where Noah lay. He was in a half-sitting half-crumbled position on the ground, holding his head. A low moan of pain came from his mouth as Wanda fell to her knees before him.

With a trembling hand, she reached out and gingerly touched his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"We…will…be," he panted.

His face was still twisted with pain, and his eyes were clenched closed. Then he ran his hands across his forehead, rubbing gently at his temples. Slowly and warily he opened his eyes, and Wanda saw the rings of silver around the pupil.

"Please, don't be alarmed, Wanderer," said the Soul. "Neither Noah or I wished to deceive you." His expression conveyed such anxiety as if he believed she would recoil away from him in alarm. Such a strange and unusual thing, a Soul held captive by his own host body. She knew she should have been more surprised. Shocked even. But she was not. He was just another impossibility to add to the growing list.

Wanda gently squeezed his arm in comfort and smiled. "No, don't worry. I understand better than
you could believe. You said your name was Evaluator of Samples?"

"Yes, but you can call me Sam. That's what Noah calls me."

"You're with him all the time. Both of you together in one body, aren't you?"

Sam nodded once. "I am. I have heard of your time with Melanie. I suppose this is similar to you?"

Suddenly Wanda felt like laughing. Jodi and Sunny would be getting a new friend. And their small odd club would grow from one to two. Or two to four. Depending on how you looked at it. "Hmm…a little," she replied. "But that's not why. You see…"

However, Sam abruptly held up a hand. His face tensing with renewed pain. "T-This is… difficult…for us….to maintain," he gasped to Wanda. "S-S-Sorreeee…" and his voice broke off as a strong shudder jolted through his body. Sucking in a deep breath, he let out a groan. "Ahhh….Crap!" He blinked twice, and Wanda could see the silver in his eyes had vanished.

"Noah, I assume?" she asked.

A fragile smile appeared on his face. "Yeah…" Noah paused and added, "Like Sam was saying, it's hard for us to switch places. We can only keep it up for a few minutes." He started rubbing his forehead again. "And I end up with a huge headache."

Again, Wanda felt like laughing. It was just the sheer craziness of the situation. "Like an ice pick to the skull?"

Surprise radiated on Noah's face at her odd choice of words. "How did you know?"

"I learned about it from Jodi when I first met her," answered Wanda. On seeing Noah's befuddled frown, she continued, "We have a lot to talk about."

Bright Moon never knew a simple swing of water could taste so good. The touch of the cold liquid to Bright Moon's parched lips was powerful enough to leave the Soul feeling dizzy in joy. Marc did as well, crooning over the relief flooding through their body from the water. Mindful to not take too much, Bright Moon took one more gulp and handed the canteen over to Justin.

Taking a pull from the bottle, the big Seeker's eyes closed in pleasure. "That," he rumbled softly, "is very good."

"We were lucky to find to the spring," said Second Sunrise. "And we did not have much time to fill up our supplies. We needed to get back here in a hurry."

Upon arriving at their hidden camp, Bright Moon and Justin were eager to relay what they had overheard and Justin's theory on who the Humans were hunting. But they soon learned Second Sunrise and Sky Roost had their own run-in with Humans earlier today. While out foraging for food and drinkable water they had observed at a distance another group of soldiers.

"There was more than fifty of them," said Sky Roost with his usual dour face. "They are coming from the northwest. Moving slowly and very thoroughly searching the area."

"No helicopters this time. They are trying to catch us off guard," mused Bright Moon.
"Yes," agreed Second Sunrise. He took the canteen from Justin and began packing it along with their meager supply of food. "We are going to need to leave here very quickly."

"I agree," replied Justin. "But the question is - Where do we go?"

"You only saw the three humans?" asked Sky Roost as he began to take down the tent.

Stepping over to aid the other Seeker, Bright Moon started working on pulling up the stakes holding the tent in place. "Only the three, but given what you told us, we have to assume there are more."

Justin hunched down and with a stick began to sketch a crude map of the area into the dirt. "We are here," he said and pointed to a small circle in the center of his drawing. "The logging road runs roughly west to east along here." He drew a curving line at the bottom of the map. "And from Second Sunrise's description, the human forces to the northwest are coming this way." Justin then drew a large X at the top corner.

Studying his map, Justin poked at the line representing the logging trail. "We saw the Humans about here, and they were headed towards this spot." He traced the road until with his stick till it reached the other corner of the map.

Bright Moon stopped working on the tent and examined Justin's work on the forest floor. Both Marc and Bright Moon saw it at the same time. The soldiers from the north would force the Seekers to move. Pushing them right into the place where Joan and her companions had headed. A carefully constructed trap was being created to snare the Seekers.

'They're trying to wedge us in,' thought Marc.

'Yes,' agreed Bright Moon, 'This is not good.'

'Damn. The Facility really has it out for me.'

Bright Moon could feel Marc's distress over the idea of his own kind hunting him. 'It's not your fault you sided with us,' said the Soul. 'You were only trying to prevent harm and more destruction.'

'They don't see it that way,' replied Marc morosely. 'I'm a traitor. I helped humanity's sworn enemy. I must be brought to justice. Let everyone know I was wrong.'

'Enough,' ordered Bright Moon. 'This accomplishes nothing. We need to be smart and figure out how to escape.'

"Is Marc talking to you?" asked Justin.

Bright Moon refocused from Marc's voice to find Justin eyeing him. "Yes, he is," admitted Bright Moon. "He's upset about the Facility coming after him."

Puzzled frowns popped onto the faces of Second Sunrise and Sky Roost. "What does Marc have to do with the other Humans?" asked Sky Roost.

Justin stood up from his map and launched into the details of the overheard conversation. Then on to Marc's and his own theories about why the Facility had been chasing them so relentlessly. As they listened, the other two Seekers' bewilderment changed to rapidly growing alarm.

"This is why they chase us? Just to reclaim Marc Walters?" questioned a disbelieving Second
"We don't know for certain," answered Justin. "But it would seem to fit with the known facts."

"It may explain a number of their activities," said Sky Roost. "But it does little to help with our current problem."

'Maybe I can be used as a distraction,' uttered Marc as a thought struck him. 'Draw their attention away from the rest. If they want me so bad, use that desire to our advantage.'

Bright Moon did not like the idea but had to at least give it consideration. Explaining Marc's proposal to the others resulted in a mix of reactions. Justin was appreciative of Marc's willingness to help but was uncertain his plan could work. Second Sunrise was surprised a Human would be prepared to aid them. But Sky Roost objected.

"I do not like the way your host has started affecting you, Bright Moon," he said. Shaking his head sternly. "Marc is not a good influence. He distracts you, brings up wild plans, and has frivolous speculations."

'Could you pull your head out of your ass? I'm trying to help, Sky Roost!' derided Marc. His anger was so strong Bright Moon could almost feel the words stick in the back of his throat. Marc's body wanted to say them out loud. But the Soul was in control and pushed them away. Instead Bright Moon said, "That's not fair. Marc has been trying to aid us. The Humans of the Facility are not his allies. He stands to suffer greatly if he's captured."

"His help is not needed," informed Sky Roost coolly. "We need to focus on our options that are practical. I see only two possibilities, we can either attempt to hide around here or make our way to the east."

"I do not think staying put is a promising idea," said Second Sunrise. "There are too many Humans this time. And they appeared determined to leave no stone unturned."

"Agreed," nodded Justin. "We might be able to escape to the east, but we run the risk of running into one of the patrolling Humans."

"We'd have better chances of overpowering a few Humans versus the forces sweeping down from the north," contended Sky Roost.

"Engaging with the Humans might be exactly what they want," said Second Sunrise. "It would allow them to pinpoint our location."

"What about heading south?" asked Bright Moon.

"Possible, but the trees and the undergrowth grow even thicker that way," explained Justin. "We would move too slow, and the pursuing soldiers would catch up to us."

As the other continued to debate their course of action, an urge grew in Bright Moon to look down. Marc was fuming over Sky Roost's comment, and his resentment was only fueling his desire to find an escape. He wanted to study Justin makeshift map. 'What is it?' asked the Soul.

'I think I've got a way to outmaneuver these army guys,' replied Marc.

Bright Moon bent down and looked at the crude drawing. Marc's mind spun around in a tight circle as he examined the map. Shifting through the possibilities.
'What about this,' proposed Marc. 'We head back to the road and follow in the direction we saw Joan, and her pals went. But then we break off after we reach them and jump back into the woods to the south. It gets us out of the range of the forces coming down from the north. And whoever is with those three won't expect us to charge directly at them. Yeah, they can chase us, but they won't be able to box us in anymore.'

'That sounds very risky,' replied Bright Moon. 'We have much better cover if we stay in the forest.'

'I don't know a lot about trees,' said Marc. 'But I do know you can move faster when you don't have to dodge around them every few feet.'

'We'd be out in the open. Exposed.'

'Speed versus stealth, darling.'

Despite the urgency of the situation Bright Moon smiled. 'I still sound like a woman to you?'

'Yup.'

'You know you are certifiably insane.'

'So I've been told,' replied Marc dryly. 'Look, my plans sound crazy because, yes, they're risky. But at heart, it's about doing what's unexpected. Turning a weakness into an advantage. And right now, our options are quickly running out.'

Bright Moon felt the tension building up in the body. Part of it was from Marc, part of it was from Bright Moon. A desire to run. Marc was right. They could not escape by hiding or running in the forest. It would be dangerous to travel on the old logging trail, but it would give them the best chance to escape.

The other three were still debating, while Bright Moon stood silent. Taking a deep breath, Bright Moon spoke. The Soul's words coming out loud and clear, cutting everyone else off - "We should take the old logging road, travel on it as far as we can, and then head back into the woods to the south. Yes, the soldiers will follow, but they will no longer be able to trap us."

All three Seeker blinked in surprise. Sky Roost was the first to recover. "Is this another one of Marc Walters's irrational plans?"

"It is."

In a moment of evident frustration, Sky Roost spat out, "Why should we listen to anything he has to say?"

"Because he knows what he's doing!" retorted Bright Moon loudly. Taking a moment to reign in all the conflicting emotions, Bright Moon started again. "Marc knows how to run and escape. I tracked him for months, and he always got away. No one is better getting out of an impossible situation. His skills are what we need right now."

'Thank you,' said Marc. Stunned by Bright Moon's praise.

Silently Justin, Second Sunrise, and Sky Roost exchanged looks. Then Justin gave a slow nod. "I agree," he said. "His plan is dangerous. But I see no other choices."

Second Sunrise's face screwed up tight with anxiety. "Maybe…it could work…"
"It will," stated Bright Moon

Sky Roost glanced to each Seeker and saw confidence from Bright Moon and Justin. Nervous but acceptance from Second Sunrise. He let out a defeated sigh. "Is this what the three of you want to do?"

"Technically, it's what the four of us want to do," put in Marc as he included himself in the group.

Justin, Bright Moon, and Second Sunrise all nodded.

"Well then," replied Sky Roost, "let's get going."

Noah leaned back against the messy workbench and started. "The night after we took over LAX, Sam woke up. It really freaked me out at first."

He, along with Wanda, Jared, Bob, and Tina sat in a loose circle in the doctor's office. Noah was looking no worse for wear after their run-in with Arnold the Free Zone security officer. They had quickly left the area and made their way back to Cedar-Sinai. Bob had managed to get word to Tina and kept her from waiting at the empty warehouses. The original hand off-site would have to be abandoned. It was now far too risky to use. Yet the concerns over the cryotanks were taking a back seat to Noah's revelation. Both Bob and Tina knew about Noah and Sam. But they had wisely kept it secret. Worried about how not only the Humans might react, but also the Souls.

"I had kept Sam with me when we went to the airport. I needed to access the information on how to operate the starships' computers," explained Noah. "Made it a lot easier when trying to do our work. But he was asleep. It was like walking through empty rooms with thousands of pictures on the wall. No thought behind any of the memories. No awareness."

Noah stopped and closed his eyes. His face tightened up in concentration. He took one breath and then another. A small spasm went through his body, and he slowly opened his eyes. The all too familiar silver sheen was back.

"But then I did wake up," said Sam. "I remembered nothing since I had been sprayed with a dark mist at the repair center. I was bewildered. And I quickly found my host body was walking and talking on its own. It was quite shocking for me as well."

It was easy to tell the difference between Noah and Sam, considered Wanda. Now that she knew what to look for between the two. Noah's speech was firmer and sharper, while Sam's was more subdued and shy. Yet the Soul displayed none of Noah's typical gloom. Despite mostly living as a disembodied voice in his host's head, Sam generally seemed upbeat about his situation.

Jared crossed his arms. His expression was hard to read. "That's more or less how Jodi explained it with Sunny. But she also told us she had problems remembering certain things. That somehow Sunny was blocking the memories of her time with us. So it wasn't, at least in the beginning, the same."

"Yes, I recall Director Smith was concerned with Jodi's lapses," said Bob. He shook his head sadly. "I can't believe I didn't realize he was lying about her death." His voice rose as the doctor turned irate. "Damn him! He lied about so much!"

Sam appeared to still be deeply disturbed by human anger. Far more than Wanda or Tina, who had
become used to the negative emotion. Bob's outburst left him shrinking back in alarm. The doctor saw the effect he was having, and said, "Sorry, Sam, didn't mean to fly off the handle there."

Meekly Sam nodded and turned to Wanda. "Noah and I are curious about Jodi and Sunny. How do they manage their dual existence?"

Wanda could tell she was once again finding herself playing the role of storyteller. "Well, I think between Jared and myself we can tell you most of the story." She settled back and began…

Their journey from the shattered city of Chicago to the safety of Jeb's caves was one long, disjointed nightmare for Wanda. It started when she, along with Ian, Scott, Dell, Annie, Simon and all her Human friends confined to the Hotel Rose made their escape into the tunnels beneath the hotel. It quickly turned into a cat and mouse game as Scott and Kate lead them through the twisting underground maze as the Seekers gave chase. Erik was narrowly able to send off Wanda's warning to Marc and Bright Moon before they had to once again run from the pursuing Seekers. They were heading for an exit that would put them on the south side of the city when one of the spaceships slammed into the center of the city at speeds defying easy comprehension. Wanda would only learn of this fact afterward. For her and her friends dashing through the dark passageways, they experienced the impact as a massive quake. The floor of the tunnel under Wanda's feet heaved upward, sending her right off her feet, only to drop away, and have her body slam painfully into the old stone walls.

Distressed moans filled the inky darkness from the rattled runners. But beyond those cries came a new sound, a distant roar. Like a thousand guns firing at once and the floor the tunnel continued to shake and vibrate under Wanda. It went on and on, growing intensity until Wanda thought her whole body would shake apart. Then, slowly, the endless thunder began to fade.


She moaned, her whole body ached. "Here," she said feebly.

He was by her side in scant seconds, scooping up, pulling her close. "Are you alright?"

"I-I think so…what happened?"

Ian's face clouded with uncertainty. "It was an explosion or something…"

"The damn Seekers must be trying to blow up the tunnels to drive us out," growled Dell. He was holding his left arm, his face twisted with pain.

"Felt a whole lot like an earthquake," came Simon's voice further back in the tunnel.

Scott, who held a hand against his forehead, trying to stem the bleeding from a gash, argued, "In Chicago? No way. We've never had a quake that strong."

Further debate about the source of the shaking and the blast was cut off as new sound rose around them. It was a creaking, deep groaning noise. Stone scraping against stone. Cracking. Breaking.

"The tunnel's coming down!" yelled Dell.

A terrifying run ensued as they fled down the shadowy narrow corridor. Now not racing from pursuing Seeker, but from the walls collapsing in on them. They were nearly at the end when the
tunnel gave out. It happened so fast. One moment Wanda was helping Sarah and her family up a steep incline. At the top of the slope, a rickety ladder led to an open manhole. Freedom. Then, in the space of a heartbeat, the walls folded and the ceiling fell in. The sudden collapse of the tunnel drove the air out in a brief but powerful gust. Enough to nearly knock Wanda down.

Coughing, sputter from the blast of dust and dirt, Wanda tried to right herself. She found Sarah was right next to her. Her legs just as unsteady. They were directly underneath the open manhole. Dusky grey light filtered down from above. Sarah choked out, "Annie and Simon were right behind me…"

Wanda turned around to see everything behind her was now nothing but a wall of broken concrete and rock. Annie and Simon were gone. Just like that.

From above her came shouts. Scott's head appeared in the circle light cast by the open manhole, his eyes frantic. "Who's still down there? Anyone hurt?"

"We're...okay," answered Sarah brokenly. She too was just staring at the remains of the collapsed tunnel. Another face joined Scott's, it was Greg. The young man's voice going shrill with panic. "My dad! Where is he?"

"Oh, no, not Paul too," whimpered Sarah as she fought back tears.

Scott and Dell had to hold Greg back, the teen would have jumped down the tunnel to try to dig his father out of ruins of cement and rubble. But there was no time to linger and what survived of the underground passageway could easily further collapse. As Nancy tried to console her boyfriend, Wanda wearily pulled herself to the surface and took in a sight that froze the very blood in her veins. In the distance, the gleaming buildings and towers of downtown Chicago lay broken and burning. A vast column of ash and dust climbing high into the sky.

"It must have been a nuke," whispered a horrified Ian as he stood next to her as he took in the grisly sight of the city.

The chaos and destruction unleashed upon Chicago made it easy for Dell and Kate to quickly appropriate two moving trucks. Seekers still in the city were obliviously busy with much more pressing matters. It would be a tight squeeze to fit twenty-four people into the two boxy vehicles' cargo holds. And an even more unpleasant form of travel for their journey. But there were no other choices. The Humans were shell-shocked survivors as they dived themselves up into the two groups. Dirty, bruised, and bleeding, their eyes held vacate and haunted stares as they gazed out from rear the trucks.

"We have to get going," said Scott. His voice was utterly devoid of emotion. "Wanda and Ian, you take the first truck, Dell and I will follow in the second."

And so began their exodus from Chicago. They stayed to the less used back roads. Driving at night, fitfully sleeping during the day. When Ian drove, they listened to the radio. The gradual but steady gathering of the information from the broadcasts painted the most horrifying of pictures. Nearly twenty cities around the globe had been hit. Like Ian's speculation upon seeing the ruins of Chicago, it was first assumed nuclear weapons were used. It was a source of great distress for the Souls for they had believed they had rid Earth of such terrible weapons. But their consternation only deepened when it became clear that the destruction had been wrought by their own starships.

"How could the Humans possibly know how to use our spacecraft?" came the distraught voice of the news reporter over the radio.
It was not a mystery to Wanda. The words 'The weapons are nearly ready,' echoed in her mind. The Vultures. They had shown the Humans how the Souls' spaceships worked. Told them how to turn the vessels into tools of destruction. She sat in stone silence, contemplating the impossible, as the report turned to the death toll. It was already over five million and growing.

When she drove, they did not listen to the radio.

On the fourth night, they finally made it to Picacho Peak. Wanda and Ian lead the bedraggled survivors from Chicago through the desert to the safety of Jeb's caves. Everyone was sore and exhausted from the long trip. Yet the promise of shelter and friendly faces gave them the strength to carry on through the craggy rocks and challenging terrain.

"Is Jeb going to have room for all of us?" asked Scott as they neared the hidden entrance.

"Don't know," replied Ian. "I guess we'll figure it out as we go."

They only made it a few more steps when a voice came out of the darkness. "Hold it right there, or I'll put a bullet right into your chest."

Ian froze, and everyone behind him did as well. A long second passed, and then Ian spoke calmly, "Andy? Is that you?"

Another pause and Wanda thought she could hear soft muttering in the surrounding darkness. Another voice came, and Wanda was sure it belonged to Aaron. "Ian…we know you were taken in Chicago. There's no way you didn't get a worm shoved into your head."

Still keeping his voice calm, Ian replied, "Check my eyes, check all of our eyes. Well…except for Wanda."

"Please Aaron," added Wanda, "it's alright. No one's here to hurt you."

It was quite clear those acting as guards for the cave's entrance were reluctant to reveal themselves to check on their identity. Luckily Dell provided his own form of identification. From further back in their procession, the big man rumbled, "I'm too damn tired and hungry to put up with this shit. Is that old man running this place going to let us in or not?"

A snort of amusement came from inky blackness, one that Wanda knew all too well. "Hmm…that's not a very polite way to ask to come into my home. But…it's all too human."

"Jeb!" cried Wanda, happy to hear his voice. "It's us. We've been traveling for days. Do whatever you need to feel safe. But none of the people with us will hurt you. They're just survivors like you."

A light flared into existence on their right side, and the silhouettes of several men became revealed in its feeble glow. One of the shadow shapes stepped closer, and in the dim light, Wanda could see features on the face. Wide cheekbones, bushy eyebrows, cleft-tipped nose, and of course, a big white beard.

"Hey, kid," said Jeb with his kindly smile. "You have no idea how good it is to see you."

Wanda ran right up to him and hugged him as firmly as her thin little arms would allow. His old weather hands lightly patted on her back. All the remaining tension fled, and Aaron, Andy, Brandt, Geoffrey all rush forward to greet her and Ian and to welcome the newcomers. The reunion was joyous, and for a brief moment, Wanda could forget about all the horror she had seen and heard.
But it did not last. Among all the introductions Ian was performing for the Chicago rebels and happy greetings he was receiving, Aaron hastily interrupted him. "Ian…it's Kyle. He was shot. He's down in the hospital." He said no more, for Ian stopped everything he was doing and took off down the cave's opening like a man running for his life. Wanda followed, leaving Scott and Dell to tell the others about their escape from Chicago. But with her much shorter stride Ian quickly outpaced her. Aaron ran with her.

"What happened? Was it the Seekers?" she panted as the passed through the central cavern. Crops were growing of some type, but she paid them no mind. The nearly all-consuming dread she had been feeling since leaving the city returned in full force.

"No…it was a…human," answered Aaron. He looked away, almost as if he was ashamed. "It's complicated. And I don't even understand it all. Jared would be better to explain."

Turning down a dark tunnel, the old familiar path to the hospital came back to Wanda. And more question. "Where is Jared? Why did Kyle get shot? What's been going on here?"

"Jared with Jamie, the kid is really upset."

That answer only served to produce a million more questions. But Wanda had to set all that aside as they reached the hospital. Ian was already there, his chest rapidly rising and falling from his mad dash here. He was kneeling next to one of the cots. Kyle laid there unmoving, looking deathly pale. For a heartbreaking second, she thought he was dead. But then she heard Kyle speak in a breathy whisper.

"Hey…bro," said Kyle faintly to Ian. Wanda had never heard him speak so feebly. He looked incredibly weak.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning, Wanda saw another all too recognizable face. "Doc!"

His arms went around her and hugged her tight. "Thank god you're alright!" said Doc as he squeezed her against his chest. "After everything we heard on the radio…"

"We just barely made it out," whispered Wanda as Doc let go of her. Glancing back to Kyle and Ian, she refocused on why she was here. "What happened to Kyle?"

"He was at the LA Airport when the - I think they're called the Facility - took over."

Wanda felt like someone had physically hit her. "What!?"

"A guy named Jeremy," came a whispered answer from Kyle. "Little punk decided he wanted to shoot people."

Wanda turned from Doc and took a few steps over to Kyle's cot. He looked up at her, his normal deep midnight blue eyes had faded to washed out grey. She could not be sure, but it looked like he had lost weight. His skin was waxy and pale.

"How are you doing?" she asked, almost fearing the answer.

"Been better," he faintly joked. "Glad…you're okay." He moved his head to look at Ian. "Both…of you."

"Wanderer!" came another familiar voice. Sunny appeared standing at the entrance of the hospital. Her face radiating absolute joy at seeing Wanda.
Almost at once she rushed over to embrace Wanda. And she hugged her back, pleased to see another friendly face. One more happy reunion. Wanda needed that right now. A million questions were swirling in her head, and almost instinctively she knew she would not like many of the answers. Having another Soul by her side would be helpful. But then something changed, Sunny went stiff as a board in her arms. She pulled away, and Wanda saw her fellow Soul's face had twisted into anger.

Not looking at Wanda, Sunny shouted at seemingly open air, "I told you not to do that unless I said it was okay!"

Sunny's change was so sudden, and out of character, Wanda found herself taking a few steps back from the small dark haired woman. Letting out a sigh, Sunny turned to Doc and said in a calmer tone, "I'm not sure if this helps your diagnosis, but it feels like someone just shoved an ice pick into my skull."

Doc nodded once to himself. "Possibly a migraine. I think we should get your blood pressure. Might tell me something."

"Sure, whatever," replied an indifferent Sunny. She turned to regard Kyle resting on the cot and saw Ian was kneeling by his brother's side. Taking a step towards the clearly confused Ian, who was just as surprised by Sunny's odd behavior, she said with an easy-going smile, "Hey geek boy, long time no see."

Wanda had never heard anyone call Ian, "geek boy." But the effect of the nickname left Ian's mouth hanging open in sheer shock. "No way…." He mumbled after he managed to get his jaw under control.

"Way…" said Sunny softly, and her smile grew sad.

As Sunny sat down on an empty cot while Doc came over to with his makeshift blood pressure cuff, Ian stood and made his way over to Wanda. His face was running through a tumult of different expressions. All the while his eyes were glued to Sunny. "That's…" he began but trailed off with an incredulous shake of his head.

"It's Jodi, isn't?" asked Wanda. That was the only explanation she could think of to explain the radical difference in the woman's behavior. Not like a Soul at all.

"Yeah," confirmed a stunned Ian.

However Ian's verification only served to further puzzle Wanda. Why had Jodi acted like Sunny when she first saw her? Why the change in personality? And most importantly what had happened to the Soul Sunlight Passing through the Ice? Crossing the distance to where Doc was examining Jodi, Wanda cautiously sat down across from the two.

"Sorry," said Jodi after a moment of staring off into space. "I'm still getting the hang of everything. I know you Wanda…but at the same time I don't know you. That make any sense?"

"What happened? How are you here?"

"Long story, really long story," sighed Jodi. Looking to Doc, she asked, "Maybe it would be better if she told it?"

Doc frowned. "I don't know. I'm still uncertain if your…change is safe. You said it hurts when Sunny takes over."
Jodi shrugged. "Only for a few moments. And only when she tries to force control. But I think it might be easier for Wanda to get the 411 from Sunny."

"Wait," interrupted an increasingly bewildered Wanda. "What do you mean? Where is Sunny?"

"Here," answered Jodi as she pressed a finger against her temple. She closed her eyes tight, and a moment later a little shudder went through her body. When she opened her eyes, Wanda caught the familiar glint of silver in them.

"Hello, Wanderer. I'm sorry about before."

Jodi's voice and tone had changed again. Became the one Wanda was accustomed to hearing. Feeling her mouth open and close but no words come out, Wanda swallowed and tried again. "H-How?"

"I…Well…We don't exactly know," said Sunny. "At first it was just Jodi, and I was asleep. When I did wake up, Jodi controlled my body. And I…" Sunny's mouth abruptly snapped shut and her nose wrinkled in an unpleasant sneer. Like her face had been scrunched up by an unseen hand. Then slowly her facial features smoothed out and returned to a more normal state. But there was still a good deal of agitation in her silver ringed eyes.

"Okay, okay," muttered Sunny to herself, "it's your body, not mine."

Finding herself going from confused, to bewildered, to outright complete incomprehension, Wanda gazed around the hospital hoping for some type of enlightenment. Clarification finally came from Kyle. He lay on his back, his face still so very pale. But he managed to raise his voice beyond its original shaky whisper. "Wanda, it's like when you were in Mel's body. Both of you in there. But also different. Both have control. Well, at least some of the time."

Kyle's brief explanation nearly drained him. His words grew weaker. "Jodes," he said faintly, "don't fight with Sunny. For me…please?"

Sunny's, or maybe it was Jodi's, face softened, Wanda was unsure which mind was in control. But whoever it was, she smiled fondly at Kyle and laid a comforting hand on his. "Alright," she agreed. Turning back to Wanda she started over. "It all began when we went to the Farmer's Market in San Bernardino…"

"…I think in a lot of ways Kyle helped both Sunny and Jodi. They were both so concerned about him, they set aside their differences. Just like Melanie and Wanda about Jamie," explained Jared as he finished his part of the story. "After a while, they started getting along with each other and their ability to share dual control over Jodi's body improved."

Feeling a little chagrinned, Wanda added, "Far better than anything Mel and I ever accomplished."

"And Jodi accepts sharing her body with Sunny?" asked Noah. He had swapped places with Sam as they had listened to Wanda speak. "I've kept Sam around because it's been useful to switch between a Soul and a Human. But I must admit I've thought about putting him in a cryotank a few times."

Wanda shook her head. "Jodi has developed quite an attachment to Sunny. In the beginning, they used to fight a lot, but not anymore."

"She about bit Doc's head off when he suggested getting a cryotank for Sunny," put in Jared. "I'm not exactly sure what their long-term plan is. I mean, they seem stable. They've worked out a sort of schedule of who gets to be in charge."
"And like you Noah," added Wanda, "it has proven beneficial for them to be able to switch identities when they go on a raid."

"Regardless of the benefits, this is of the most importance," exclaimed Bob. "We thought Noah's condition was unique. Now we know about Sunny and Jodi. This leads me to think there may be others."

"Indeed," agreed Wanda, a little surprised she had not seen the same possibility. "Doc believes Jodi's ability comes from exposure to the Facility's CURE drug. I guess it's the same for Noah."

Bob rubbed his chin. "That would seem to be the common link. Although I'm uncertain how that's possible."

"So, anyone who's been exposed to CURE might be able to do what Jodi or Noah can do," asked Jared. Then he frowned. "That doesn't sound like something the Facility would want to have that happen."

"No, I can't imagine it was part of their plans. But something has evidently gone wrong. I'll need to start running some more tests." The doctor looked pointedly at Noah.

Noah sank down into a chair and let out a groan. "Oh, fun..."

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They almost made it.

Marc's route to escape the trap was a good plan. It was risky, but at that point, the Seekers had few options. Countless variables then came into play. How fast the Seekers could move. How quickly the soldiers chasing them would close the distance. The terrain of the forest. The stifling heat. But it really boiled down to luck. A roll of the dice. Chance. Whether they would outmaneuver their pursuers and escape or not.

After making back to the dirt road, the Seekers had run as fast as they could. Trying to make as much distance on the flat compacted ground. Then they had sighted a group of camouflaged soldiers milling about on the road ahead. Stunned surprise broke through on the gathered Humans. But before they could react, Bright Moon and the others broke off and headed back into the woods. Their movement hindered by the thick undergrowth. Yet the soldiers had been so taken off guard they were too slow in their pursuit. Bright Moon had begun to feel cautiously optimistic. They had managed to beat the closing trap.

Just as they crested a small hill, where the trees thinned out, they took a brief stop to rest and get their bearings. Their bodies painfully arched after running for so long. From their vantage point on the ridge, they could see the endless forest stretching out in front of them. More than enough places for the fleeing Seekers to hide. But it was not to be. As Bright Moon folded up Marc's long legs and rested his weary head on his knees, without warning eight figures rushed out of the nearby tree line.

There was not much of fight. All four Seekers were utterly exhausted. Seeker Justin held their only gun. A rifle with just a handful of bullets. He did not even get a chance to bring the weapon up before a hail fire from the soldiers' guns mowed him down.

Now his bullet-ridden body lay motionless on the ground. Red blood seeping into the ground around him. His eyes open and staring upward into the sunny sky, forever unseeing.
"None of you move!" bellowed one of the soldiers.

A cold, empty horror filled Bright Moon as the Humans rushed forward. It was over. No more running. Rough hands grabbing them and forcing them to the ground. Then more orders were being given by the Humans. Barking commands demanding to know if there any more Seekers.

Bright Moon had felt like he had cheated death once before in the bunker. Living on borrowed time. Maybe this was for the best. Marc could have his body back after…

'NO!' screamed Marc. 'Don't give up!'

Defiant to the end. Marc would never go down without a fight. Misery rained through the Soul that they had not had more time together. Bright Moon lament was a whisper of pain. 'It's over…We tried…At least we get to say goodbye…'

'I will not let them hurt you!' vowed Marc. 'If they want me so badly they'll have to deal with me. Or I'll…'

'What? Kill yourself?' cried Bright Moon at Marc's perceived threat. 'Not for me….please not for me…'

"This is the one," said a voice that pulled them both back to the outside world. From on the ground, Bright Moon looked upward. A mostly balding man with a fuzzy mustache of about forty stood before them. His uniform was like the ones worn by the Humans Bright Moon had seen with Justin, a mixing of greens and browns for his camouflage outfit, yet he wore a distinct black stripe across his shoulders. Bright Moon realized all the soldiers now surrounding them had the same strip of black. The man with mustache appeared to be the one in charge. He gazed down at Bright Moon with cold eyes. In his hands he carried something rectangular, made of plastic and metal. A tablet computer.

"Yes," he said as he glanced at the screen and then crouched down next to the captured Souls. His hand latched onto Bright Moon's hair dragged the Soul's head up to get a better look. "This is the one we're after."

His grip was painful, and Bright Moon's head was pulled up at an awkward angle, forcing him to look into the man's eyes. Not a trace of warmth was in that face. Something deep and primal made Marc's skin crawl. The name 'Lenson' was titled on the upper left side of the man's uniform.

"You are Seeker Bright Moon on Fallen Snow?" asked the man named Lenson. There was a casual normality in his question. As if he had just walked up to Bright Moon in the middle of a typical day on the street in Chicago and had asked for the Seeker's identity. Not a man with a set of goons pointing guns at Bright Moon's head.

The question and the manner it was asked so stunned Bright Moon that all the Soul could manage was a weak, "W-What?"

"Your name," repeated Lenson. "You are Seeker Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. Yes or no."

"Y-Yes," stuttered a confused Bright Moon.

Lenson released his hold on Bright Moon's hair, and another hand pushed Bright Moon's head back into the dirt. Other voices spoke up above them as the Humans talked among themselves. One speaker, someone other than Lenson, spoke over the others, "We concerned about it shredding the host's brain?"
"Unlikely, but even if it does," said Lenson, "we have a cryotank to store it. Top priority goes to its retrieval."

Both Bright Moon and Marc felt a powerful shock at the man's pronouncement. 'We had it wrong,' agonized Marc. 'They wanted you after all…'

Head pressed into the dirt, still unable to believe what the Humans were saying, Bright Moon moaned, "No…You came for Marc…"

The hand holding Bright Moon yanked upward, and the Soul was once again faced to face with Lenson. He cocked his head to one side and gave Bright Moon a curious look. "We'd take just you, Seeker. But now we have you both. An optimal solution." He leaned closer, and his voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "We have questions, and you will answer them."

"If you…want…me…leave…my…friends," gasped out Bright Moon, desperate to find a way for Sky Roost and Second Sunrise to survive.

Lenson just shook his head. "You have no leverage, Seeker. We know you care for Marc Walters. I don't believe you would willingly kill him. And if I'm wrong, like I said, we can still tank you. There is no escape."

"Please…" begged Bright Moon. "You don't…"

But the Humans were not listening. Lenson stood and made a quick hand gesture to the guards surrounding the other two Seekers. Second Sunrise and Sky Roost were on the ground, only a few away from Bright Moon. Their bodies pressed into the dirt by half a dozen Humans, but by chance, they had managed to twist their heads towards Bright Moon. One last look. There was one long moment where all three Souls' held each other's eyes. Their gaze a mix of horror and exhausted grief.

Then the soldiers pointed their guns and fired.

An agonized cry weld up in Bright Moon as the Humans coldly and calmly executed both Second Sunrise and Sky Roost. Only the sheer brutality of the act pushed all the air from Marc's body, and the scream came out as a little more than a strangled wheeze. And yet an outraged shout still came but from a most unlikely source.

"What in the hell are you doing!?!" yelled a voice of a woman.

The hands holding down Bright Moon relaxed a tiny amount. Surprised at hearing the furious scream, Bright Moon managed to turn just enough to see the newcomer. It was Joan. She was standing outside the ring of soldiers. Joan's face was red from the apparent run she had made up the hill. Her body breathing hard, with quick hard pants. But her expression on her face was that of pure rage.

"You just killed them!?!" shouted Joan in disbelief. "You didn't even try to bring them back!?!"

There was a flutter of uncertainty through the soldiers surrounding Bright Moon. Lenson's cool and calm expression turn a degree harder. And when he spoke, his voice took on a very low and intense tone. His words coming out only a little louder than a whisper. "What are you doing here? You and your squad were supposed to be at bravo point."

"These four worms showed up at bravo point, and we gave chase" replied Joan hotly. She shot an accusing finger towards Lenson. "And you weren't answering our radio calls. So, I broke off from my team to report to you in person. Good thing I did. I got to watch your execution squad at work."
"The situation here…is complicated," replied Lenson. "There are factors you don't know about. You were assigned by the army to help us, and you did." His voice rose from his soft yet severe quality as he commanded. "You work here is done. Return to your squad, Lieutenant Naylor."

Joan let out an angry laugh. "Oh…you better believe I'm going back to my squad! And they're going to hear all about this!" She took a threatening step towards Lenson and the other soldiers. "I'll make sure this gets run all the way up to General Mannheim. We don't kill the parasites when there is a chance to recover the hosts. That's what your CURE is supposed to do. And you didn't even try."

Lenson took one step towards Joan. Closing the distance until there were almost face to face. "As I said," he replied calmly, "It's complex. We have reasons why those parasites needed to be eliminated. Unfortunately, we couldn't allow their hosts to recover."

"Why!?" demanded Joan. Pointing to Bright Moon, she continued, her voice once rising in incredulity. "What is so damn important about that worm? Why search for it for weeks? Why do any of this?"

Lenson did not answer right away. Instead, he put his back to Joan and paced away from both her and the soldiers surrounding Bright Moon. Joan glared at Lenson's back side. The tension in the hot, humid air was becoming palpable. Like a physical weight pushing on everyone.

As Marc and Bright Moon watched Joan grow increasingly frustrated with Lenson's silence, both wanted to call out to her. To plead for help. Maybe it would have fallen on deaf ears. Or perhaps Joan would have listened, tried to aid them. But they would never find out for Lenson suddenly spun around with a gun in his hand. The move so fast Joan did not have time to react. Lenson fired once, and his aim was all too deadly. The bullet hit her square in the forehead. Then Joan's body hit the ground, still twitching as if her arms and legs had failed to realize the brain controlling them was now obliterated.

Lenson let out a loud sigh. "Well…" he grumbled in a strangled hiss as he surveyed Joan's body, "sometimes the buggers go down fighting. Push anyone far enough, and they can become violent when cornered. Even the parasites. We had no choice but to return fire." He paced around her fallen form in a tight fuming circle. "Yes," he nodded agitatedly to himself, "There was a struggle, one of them managed to tackle me. Get my gun."

None of the others still surrounding Bright Moon said a word. They merely stood impassively as Lenson continued to speak. They seemed to be rehearsing, repeating his words over and over. Forming his lie. "Yes," he repeated as he bent down by Seeker Second Sunrise's body, "this one got a hold of my gun. We fought, but he was able to get off a shot." He placed his pistol in Second Sunrise's dead hand. "Lieutenant Joan Naylor was unfortunately in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"He's a monster,' decried Marc. 'As bad as Adams. They're nothing but a bunch of psychopaths.'

But Bright Moon was beyond words. Horrified into distraught silence. In the space of little more than five minutes, the Humans had executed four people. One of them their own kind. The absolute viciousness of Lenson left the Bright Moon feeling physically ill.

Returning to Bright Moon, Lenson stood over the Soul. His calm demeanor was back. "Now, let's get you out of here," he said smoothly. "Alex is waiting."
Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay on this chapter. My real life, such as it is, still likes to intrude.

Next chapter - The war between the Souls and the Humans intensifies.
In the stillness of the night, a boom from an artillery cannon cut through the silent dark. Several more blasts followed. Each one sending a shell arching high into the nighttime sky. At the top of their trajectory, they detonated. Blazing forth with a brilliant white flash, momentarily as bright as the sun. Those initial explosions quickly faded and then the flares ejected by the shells' detonations ignited. Slowed by deployed parachutes, the incandescent magnesium lights gradually began to illuminate the ground below in a flickering pale glow.

A man standing on a nearby hill offering a vantage point for surround area watched the bright light in the sky. He was in his late fifties, dressed in combat fatigues. Tall with graying hair. He wore a very stern face, one that seemed to be frozen on his time-worn skin. His jaw tight, his lips set in a thin line, and his eyes dark and intense. To many who met him and saw his harsh expression, it was as if the very aspect was etched into his face. In a way, it was. The underlying muscles controlling those features had carried the visage for so long they had almost forgotten how to smile or laugh. And this face had not been by the man's choice. Those decisions on how to set his expression, his voice, indeed his every action had been stolen by another mind for more than twenty years.

Patrick Manheim, General of the Human Resistance Army, and the former host of the Soul Sage of Tides, pulled a pair of binoculars from his uniform's front pocket. He wanted to get a better look at the city of Madison, Wisconsin. Cast in the light by the overhead flares, the darkened city slowly revealed itself. In the past, the Madison would have customarily been illuminated by countless lights from the buildings and streets. With the domed state capital building take center stage in the skyline, it's white granite surface would have glittered like a jewel.

But not anymore. Nearly two weeks ago, Madison's electrical power and water mains on the outskirts of the town had been destroyed. Manheim's army had then encircled the city. Ever since then a steady stream of shells had rained down on the capital of Wisconsin. Ripping apart buildings, roads, and any infrastructure that could provide protection for the city's populace. The iridescent lights descending from above revealed buildings that were little more than skeletal remains of offices and apartment buildings. Even the state capital building bore an ugly scar on the side of the dome.

"There's no sign of activity on the western side," said Patrick aloud as he studied the besieged city. "The parasites haven't repaired any of their barricades. We should be able to almost walk right in unopposed."

From behind the General, another man pulled his own pair of binoculars out and began to securitize the same area. "More or less confirms what ze scouts reported," replied Colonel Jean Pier Durant.

Durant was a younger man by fifteen years compared to Manheim. He had none of the lines of age to his face. Nor did he display any of the General's hard-nosed features. He was genial and known to easily smile and laugh. Most consider him much more approachable than the hard-hearted Manheim. Yet despite their differences, the two men worked well together, and the Colonel had quickly become the second in command of the army.

Manheim lowered his binoculars and turned to the other man. "Which is why I'm concerned. It's
"You think it's a trap?" questioned Durant.

"It's possible, but I think it's more likely a distraction. The parasites have been trying to break out of our blockade for days. Now they make it look like their defenses are weak on the west side. We put our forces there to take the city, and they attack the opposite side to make their escape."

Durant smiled. His French accent, which was usually very mild when he spoke, swelled in his words, "Eh, dzose trickee litlee buggehrs. Wat sall we do?"

"Stomp on them," replied Manheim evenly. The General's eyes then went distant, and Durant knew Patrick was going through his many memories of when he was Sage of Tides. In battle, knowing how your enemy thought was always important. But understanding your foe took on a whole new meaning when you had their very memories. The Souls had used such knowledge to conquer the Earth. Now humanity was using the same tactics and repaying the aliens in kind.

With his gaze still unfocused, Manheim spoke slowly, carefully running through the possible strategies. "We can make a faint towards the west side of the city. Let the parasites think we've taken the opening. But we'll hold our reserves back…make them take the next move…. Try to escape or push us back from entering the city. Either way, they show their hand." He nodded to himself. "Then we move in and cut it off."

Durant weighed his friend's plan. It was simple, straightforward, and relied on their army's ability to quickly redeploy itself. But the General's proposal was not without risk. "And if they don't make a move? If they stay hunkered down?" asked Durant. "We're burning through food nee fuel while we try to take zee city."

"Which is why we need to push forward, regardless of what they do," replied Manheim as he turned around and began walking down the hill. By now the flares overhead had faded. Their intense white light was turning sallow and ruddy. Shadows were quickly reclaiming the countryside. Durant fell in beside him. "We've wasted enough time trying to break the parasite's line. Mind you," continued the General, "I don't look forward to taking Madison block by block, but once we've got the city…"

"...Our unwelcome guests are effectively shut down en the area. Your great state of Wisconsin ez free from alien influence. One more great conquest for humanity," said Durant with an easy laugh.

Patrick's lips twitched upward. Almost into a smile. "Perhaps not the most prestigious of victories, but important none the less."

"Eh, it is. Yet I still dream of returning home and freeing my own people. When we are done in your country, you will come with me? Patrick, you will love Paris." Durant's face broke out into a full born grin. "You can be Eisenhower and I zill be de Gaulle, storming the beaches of Normandy."

A wistful sigh came from the other man as they walked along. "It is a long road we must travel, my friend before we're ready to take on Europe."

Durant stopped and took hold of the Manheim's arm. "Mon amie, Patrick. Look at what we've done in just three months. Think of where we will be in six months or eh year. The road ahead ez not that long."

"True," admitted Manheim. "But I prefer to focus on the here and now. Daydreaming about a free
"Earth is a luxury we can't afford."

"Hmm, speaking of the here and now," replied Durant, "I do believe we soon have an all-important call to make."

The older man openly grumbled. "Don't remind me. I'm not looking forward to talking to the brat and his groupies."

"Patrick, Patrick," mock scolded Durant, "Is that any way to talk about our benefactors at ze Facility?"

Manheim grunted but made no additional comment and Durant did not continue with his joke. There were pressing matters at hand. Plans were already being drawn up for the army's next target. The task of freeing the Earth from the parasite's control was a slow, grueling process. Durant reflected that Patrick was right, there was a long road ahead for them, and much work to do.

Coming down the hill, both men stopped before the edge of their base camp. More than a dozen tents made up the army's headquarters. A collection of rectangular canvas buildings of molted colors of dark greens and browns. Laid out in a tight semi-circle at the center of tents were a group of twenty men and women, waiting at attention. Each one of them a battalion commander, overseeing nearly one thousand soldiers. The bulk of Humanity's new army. Approaching his officers, Manheim gave a quick salute and ordered them at ease.

"Today is the day we kick the parasites out of that city," announced the General with a wave of his arm towards the now dark Madison. "Get your troops up and ready by dawn," he commanded with blunt authority. "Colonel Durant will have specifics to you at 0630. Dismissed."

Durant could see the surprise on some of their faces, relief on others. The more than two-week siege of the city would be finally ending. It had been an exhausting ordeal. After the parasites punishing loss at Iron Mountain, the Souls had repeatedly retreated as humanity's still nascent army of former Seekers fought to retake the planet. Victories had come quickly and often. But here at Madison, Wisconsin, the Souls had dug in their heels and struggled to push back the advancing humans. Many of parasites in the city were not Seekers, and while they were not particularly well suited to fighting, they were certainly determined. Both he and Patrick had repeatedly discussed the parasites' change in tactics. It was clear the Souls were not going to give up Earth easily. And if buggers could adapt and change their strategy, then so would they.

As the brief meeting ended and the battalion commanders broke off to rouse the troops, Patrick and Durant made their way into the nearest tent. An erected tower stood off to one side of their destination, bristling with antenna and satellite dishes sticking out at odd angles. Ducking under the low hanging awning entrance, the two men entered the base's primary communication hub. The canvas walls of the tent were covered entirely with an array of electronic equipment. Sophisticated devices relaying orders to other parts of the army and subtly listening to the parasites' own transmissions.

Centered neatly on the far wall, a large protection monitor awaited them. Its four-sided screen was cast in a blank blue color with a digital display of 4:19 AM stamped in the bottom right-hand corner. After a few moments passed, the clock's time shifted to 4:20 AM and then the monitor began to flicker.

"Hello…" came a disembodied voice from a nearby speaker. "General…can you hear me?"

General Manheim folded his arms and glowered at the still flickering screen. Durant knew he did not like being summoned. Not like this, not when they had more important issues to deal with. And
"We can hear you," replied Patrick after few strained seconds had passed. "The video is still offline."

"One moment," came the response over the speaker. The monitor flickered a few more times, and then the blue background gave way to a pixilated image. Unfocused, blocky pixels rapidly resolved into a simple room with false wood paneling, an elongated steel gray table, and one empty chair. Once the video had stabilized, the moving shadow of someone off to the side briefly fell across the table and chair and then vanished off the left side of the screen.

The remote voice came again, "Better now?"

"Yes," replied Patrick. "We are receiving you, Alex."

"Excellent!" came the reply as a young man in his mid-twenties moved into view. Scrawny was the best word Durant could think of as Alex settled into the empty chair. His body was thin and lean. With a head covered with dusty blond hair coming down to ears which stuck out just a bit too much. Leaving his head looking overly narrow and his hazel eyes a little too close together. It gave the leader of the Facility the appearance he was always intently gawking at anyone and everyone. Durant reminded himself that despite Alex's somewhat meek presence, this kid was one of the most powerful people on the planet.

Alex glanced to his left for a moment and then refocused on the camera. "Well, now," he said as he folded his hands together, "It's good to be seeing you again General Manheim and Major Durant. How goes the battle to retake the city?"

Once again Durant found himself marveling at the idea Alex lead the clandestine team who had turned the tide against the Souls. Developing their miraculous CURE drug in secret, then luring an army of Seekers in to be converted back to humans, all the while setting up the plan to turn the parasites' own ships against them.

Manheim cleared his throat. "I'm ordering a major push into Madison, starting at daybreak. The city's defenders have been whittled to only a few hundred. We estimate the entire city has less than five thousand worms left in it. They'll not be able to keep us out."

"That's fantastic news, General," replied Alex with a bob of his head. He quickly moved on. "Your supplies holding? Food, fuel?" A moment of hesitation and he added, "CURE?"

"Our supplies are holding, yes," agreed Manheim. "But we'll be needing a dedicated resupply of nearly everything once we're done here."

Alex bobbed his head again. "Yes, I thought as much. You'll be looking to raiding Milwaukee or Chicago for supplies?"

Letting his arms uncross, Manheim replied, "I was thinking of something a bit different."

Alex arched an eyebrow up and replied with a puzzled, "Oh?"

"We've ransacked any number of places across the countryside and taken control of some of the cities around the region. Minneapolis, Rockford, Green Bay, Grand Rapids, Rochester…and Detroit." Manheim's words linger on the last name, an unpleasant grimace on his face.

"Now, General," quickly implored Alex, "No one is blaming you for Detroit. It's a big city, and the recovered population was frightened and confused. Things got out of hand."
Manheim's face further darkened. "But I do take the blame. I have not, and will not, stomach the idea we had to start shooting our own people to restore order. That was my failure."

Alex held up his hands in an almost defensive gesture. "I know, I know…Look we all understand this is a difficult road we're traveling. We're now getting Detroit under control. However, mistakes, unfortunately, will be made."

Nodding curtly, Manheim replied, "And to minimize such future mistakes, I'll be changing our how we do things."

Another arched eyebrow came from Alex. "Will you now? What do you plan to do?"

"We need to look at a long-term strategy. Where will we be in six months, a year, five years. We can't constantly be fighting and raiding with our growing population. People want some sense of order and stability."

"But the parasites…"

Manheim shut off Alex's burgeoning protest with a wave of his hand. "I'm not saying we stop fighting. But to change what we are fighting over. Instead of jumping in and out to capture food and fuel, we directly take control of those resources."

A look of surprise filled in Alex's face, replacing his earlier objection. He looked off to the side for a moment and then nodded his head. "Walk me through it," he said.

It was Durant's turns to speak. "My expedition forces have made zit as far west as Wyoming and to Winnipeg to zee north. Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, all zat rich farmland. And the oil shale and natural gas deposits in the Dakotas. Much of the territory es lightly defended by zee Seekers. They are spread thin. Its open to zee taking."

The young leader of the Facility rubbed his chin. "That's a sizable chunk of countryside. You have the manpower to take and hold all that?"

"We wouldn't be going after the bigger cities," answered Manheim, "Just the land in-between. Towns and small cities we can either take over and push the parasites out. We'll contain the worms in the larger towns and control the rest. A steady supply of resources for us and at the same time weakening the Souls."

Alex once again looked off to the left. To someone off screen. Durant and Manheim noticed, and both men exchanged a knowing glance. They had seen this before with their calls to the Facility and had speculated what it meant. For as much as it appeared Alex Winston was the unchallenged leader of the Facility, Manheim had wondered if the truth was Alex was nothing more than a figurehead. That someone else held the real reins of power. But as to why the people of the Facility needed to create such a fabrication was anyone's guess.

Licking his lips, Alex turned his attention back to the video screen. "Well, General, I have to admit it sounds like you've put a lot of thought into this plan. But…I'm a little concerned about overextending ourselves. You could be leaving yourself open to counter-attack. I've seen the intelligence reports showing the buggers are trying to reconstitute their fighting force. That Chicago, despite taking a direct hit in our opening attack, is still organizing the Seekers in the region."

Manheim shook his head. "The worms have been on the defensive since Iron Mountain. They may have the numbers, but they lack the military hardware to effectively go on the offensive. Having
gotten rid of much our world's weapons have left them crippled when fighting against us."

"I wouldn't count on them to remain passive," countered Alex. "We've already seen them slow you down in Madison. We need to end the threat posed by parasites in remaining nearby cities. Especially Chicago."

"I'm not saying there isn't risk, or that we won't deal with the Chicago in time," replied the General testily. "But I take this as a sign we also need to change how we operate. We can't afford to become predictable."

A deepening frown on Alex's face made his eyes narrow even more than usual. An edge of sharpness entered his words. "I'm…troubled by the fact we might not be able to deliver our CURE drug if you push out too far. You need our weapon to efficiently take on the worms."

And there it was, thought Durant. A veiled threat. Do I say, or I'll cut off your supply of our wondrous medicine. Alex was pushing them away from extending Humanity's territory. But why? Why did he want them to focus on Chicago?

Manheim took a menacing step closer to the video screen. His face very hard to read. In a very low voice, he asked, "Are you saying you would stop supplying us?"

Far-off in his underground lab, Alex reacted to the General's movement and question with a broad, friendly smile. "No, of course not. I'm simply explaining we might have difficulties sending supplies so far away. We need to keep it out of the Souls' hands. If they got a hold of a sample, even a small amount, they could work out an effective defense to it."

The General frowned. "You said there were countermeasures in the drug to keep the worms from learning how it works."

"There are," Alex agreed, "CURE's breaks down into its base components after it has been exposed to air in a few minutes. There are masking chemicals in it to make it difficult to detect. But nothing is foolproof." Leaning back in his chair, Alex continued. "We based CURE on the parasites' own medical technology. They are all too capable of figuring out how it works. We've gone to extensive lengths to make sure it's not compromised."

"Including us," muttered Manheim softly enough that only Durant heard. It had routinely been a point of contention between Patrick and Alex over the production of CURE. Alex would only allow the Facility to produce and supply the drug. The army knew next to nothing about how it actually worked.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that," said Alex. He was again leaning forward in his chair, his eyes narrowly focused on the two soldiers.

"It was nothing," replied Manheim curtly. Trying to move past their latest disagreement, the General reigned back some of his irritation. "I take it, Alex, you have a different strategy in mind?"

Alex paused, seemingly gathering his thoughts. He took a deep breath and let it out. "This war is more than just a battle to retake the planet. It's an ideological battle. We need the parasites to be terrified of us. To fear humans completely. To never, ever, want to come back to Earth."

Manheim shrugged. "I think we've done an outstanding job of doing just that."

"It's not enough," explained Alex. "We've been largely successful because we caught the parasites flatfooted. They've never experienced rebellion on a world they've conquered. They're not used to it, and if there is anything I've learned about these worms is they are creatures of habit. They
believe, nearly to the point of obstinance, that they are in the right. All in the name of the greater
good. And that belief needs to be…eliminated."

"What do ze want us to do?" asked Durant.

Alex had a one-word reply, "Chicago."

"What about it?" question Manheim.

"As I said, despite taking a direct hit with a spaceship bomb, the Seekers are still operating in the
city. It's the largest metropolis in the region. And I want it broken. I want for all the parasites on
Earth to see that nothing can stop us."

Manheim mulled over Alex's request. "A psychological blow," he said at last. "Like what we did at
Iron Mountain."

"Exactly."

"Ze were lucky there," put in Durant. "Nearly did we not win zee battle."

"But you did win," answered Alex emphatically. "And you saw what happened. The Souls fell
apart in a panic. They were stuck on the idea because they outnumbered us, they would
automatically be victorious. We need to capitalize on that mental flaw."

"Taking Chicago will not be like Detroit," countered Manheim. "We essentially blitzkrieg them and
outpaced the buggers' defensive line. And that was a bit of luck as well. That's not something we're
likely to repeat."

Alex nodded in agreement. "I'm not saying it will be easy. Nor am I looking for a complete rout of
the Seekers. Just enough to force them to give up their plans. We need the common Soul to believe
the Seekers can't save them."

Durant watched Patrick's brow furrowed in deep thought. On the video screen, Alex waited
patiently. But Durant once again caught the young man glancing off to one side. Who was he
silently getting instructions from?

Finally, the General let out a tired sigh. "You bring up some good points Mr. Winston. I will take
them under advisement in our future efforts."

Alex's face fell. He was not prepared for Manheim to refuse him. "But General…” he began in
protest.

"I said I would think about it and I will," shot back Manheim. Rising anger began in the General.
"The army is the one putting itself on the line to fight the invaders. And I'm responsible for this
fight. Not you. I need to consider all the possible options."

"I'm not trying to offend you," protested Alex innocently.

But it was already clear to all that Alex had already lost the Generals attention. "There is no
offense, I'm just stating the facts," Manheim answered flatly as he moved to the screen to shut
down the video conference. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a battle to win."

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"The raid by the Human insurgents on the grain storage sites outside Waterloo, Iowa represents the largest attack so far in the region. Sixty-two Seekers dead, thirty-nine missing. The grain was stolen, the infrastructure completely destroyed. We project shortfalls..."

Seeker Jade in the Hollows stopped reading and put down the paper with a heavy sigh. She knew exactly how the rest of the account would go. Loss of life, loss of equipment, and loss of crops. Eight other reports sitting on her desk told her precisely the same thing. They all began the same way, and they all ended the same way. With the same inevitable conclusion - there would be more food shortages.

Her desk was stacked with many folders and reports. Seeker deployments, evaluations for new trainees, evacuation and relocation plans for endangered cities. So much to do. Jade's eyes lingered on one folder that lay at the center of her desk. A broad black label with red lettering affixed to the top with the title - Madison, Wisconsin.

Jade quickly looked away. She was not ready to deal with the contents of that particular folder. Leaning back, she found her shoulders were stiff and sore. She had sat hunched over these reports for far too long. Resting against the high back of her chair, she let its smooth leather comfort her petite body. She needed a break, a distraction. Rubbing the bridge of her nose, she fought back a sudden wave of fatigue.

Turning in her chair, she looked out the window and saw the eastern sky across Lake Michigan had shifted from the empty black of night to the early morning glow of dawn. It had been so very early when she had started. She had not realized so much time had passed. From her vantage point on the twenty-ninth floor of the Seekers' temporary command center, the sun was fast climbing on the horizon and bringing about the beginning of a new day. And the sky! It was filled with rosy crimsons, shallow pinks, and deep amber yellows. It was quite beautiful.

Ironic such beauty had come from terrible destruction. The impact from the starships had thrown dust and debris high into the atmosphere. Out of control fires around the world had done the rest. A permantent haze lingered in the sky.

Her eyes lowered from the auburn glow of the eastern horizon and took in the Chicago skyline. From her point of view on the northern side of the city, there were all the signs of a city waking up and coming alive. The electric glow of street lights and office buildings were diming as the morning progressed. The snaking lines of concrete highways were already busy with traffic.

But as she gazed to the south, the view turned painful. An ugly scar of half-demolished buildings and ruins filled her sight. These remains circled a crater nearly a quarter of a mile-wide right at the heart of the city. The impact had happened with such force that for a split second it was as if a miniature star had touched the ground. And from such an encounter Chicago had burned. In less than the span of a heartbeat, the city had gone from a living, vibrant community to hell on Earth. Jagged remains of skyscrapers, like some giant beasts' skeletons, still clawed upwards into the sky. But they were only shattered remnants of the shining buildings they had once been. Polished steel and glass splintered apart. Stone and brick cracked and burnt.

Now, months later, the work to remove and clear the wreckage went on twenty-four hours a day. A steady stream of dump trucks full of debris trudged their way out of the ruins while another set continuously brought in new supplies to rebuild and repair. It was a slow and arduous process.

Yet, even though the sight was a grisly reminder of that terrible day, it filled Jade with a certain swell of pride. They were not beaten. They were not broken. The Souls would recreate all which had been destroyed. Not just here in Chicago, but everywhere the barbarous humans had attacked. It would be a testament to her people's determination and sacrifice for peace and order.
A knock at the door to her office brought her out of her private reverie. Jade turned in her oversized chair to see her assistant Hannah standing in the doorway. She was fitted into a nice middle-aged host body. Curly dark hair framed a friendly smiling face. And she had the most amazing green eyes. Jade always found herself a little envious of Hannah's luck of having such an attractive feature.

"I'm sorry, Seeker Jade," said Hannah. "I didn't realize you were already here. It's still quite early. Is there a problem?"

"No worries," replied Jade. "There is nothing urgent. Just a good deal of work to do so I came in early...or very late, depending on how you look at it."

"Oh, I would have come in if you needed me. Pulling an all-nighter with you could be fun."

Jade smiled. Hannah was a youngling, born on Earth. A new generation tasked with some of the most challenging work of taming this unruly world. She was eager to help. "I will keep that in mind the next time sleep eludes me and I decide to pull an 'all-nighter.'"

Hannah nodded serenely. "Thank you, Seeker. Since I didn't realize you were here, I was going to leave you a note. But since you are here, I will tell you directly," she said with a grin. "A Night Ember Lights is waiting outside. He's tried several times in the last few days to meet with you. I was going to tell him to come back later. What would you like me to do?"

Night Ember Lights. Another youngling and a former Seeker. He was also the one-time friend to the little tribe of Humans who had made their home in Chicago's sewers. Jade had met him once before when he was captured in their raid on the same Humans. Jade had met him once before when he was captured in their raid on the same Humans. She had initially thought him an imposture, a Human masquerading as a Soul. But she would learn he merely was a young and easily swayed Soul who became swept up in Wanderer's crazy ideas. Jade had a feeling she knew why he was here. "Ah, yes, please send him in."

Turning around, Hannah waved her hand at someone unseen in the outside office. A few moments later a young man with short, wiry hair appeared in the doorway. Jade noticed around his neck and throat a slight discoloring of his dark skin. Lighter in color than the rest, the dermis was smooth and flawless. New skin. Regenerated from the damaged old.

A quick nod came from Night Ember Lights as he entered. "Thank you for seeing me, Seeker Jade."

"It's my pleasure." Indicating one of the chairs before her desk, she added, "Please, sit down. How are you?"

He took the seat offered. "I am...better," he said softly. "The Healers have told me I've made a full recovery."

"That is welcoming news. Do you mind telling me what happened?"

Night Ember Lights at first said nothing, and for a moment Jade thought he was not going to answer. But then with a deep sigh, he explained, "Burns...I was badly burned in the blast."

Jade felt a swell of pity for the man. He had survived the attack on the city, but not without cost. There were many killed when the altered starship had rammed into Chicago, but many more wounded. With the city burning, the medical centers had been completely overwhelmed. Countless Souls had to endure their injuries while they waited for treatment from exhausted Healers. "Night Ember Lights, I am so sorry you went through such suffering."
"I suppose I was luckier than many," he replied with a sad shake of his head. "And please, it's just Nigel, that's what my friends call me."

"Well Nigel, you seem to be doing much better now. I'm glad the Healers could help. What brings you here at such an early hour?"

Another long pause passed. Nigel was looking down at the floor, every aspect of his body radiating discomfort. Finally, he said in a near whisper, "I want to leave."

Jade felt her forehead wrinkle in confusion. "I'm sorry? You don't want to be here with me?"

Nigel looked up, yet his eyes did not focus on her. Instead, he stared at some distant point out the windows of her office. He seemed to be gathering himself. Willing himself forward. "No. I don't want to be here... On this planet."

"Oh..." breathed out Jade in understanding. 'Skipping...'

She felt disappointed. When Hannah had informed her Nigel was waiting to see her, Jade had hoped he had come to reenlist as a Seeker. That after nearly being killed by the Humans' attacks, he had come to his senses. Realized how wrong Wanderer had been. But instead, Nigel wanted to skip, to leave his host body and this world behind.

Jade let her head sink into the plush leather of her chair. It was comforting in this bit of unwelcome news. Perhaps it was only natural for Nigel to want to leave. His young life had been filled with violence and tragedy. Almost all Souls longed for peace and tranquility. Just a few had the stomach for the activities of a Seeker.

Pulling her head forward, she said wearily, "I must admit, Nigel, I had hoped you had come here for other reasons. Have you talked with a Comforter? Might they help you?"

"I have spoken with many Comforters, they all offer the same advice – We are all stronger if we all stay. We all must do our duty. Together we can rebuild what was destroyed."

Jade nodded in agreement. "And they are not wrong."

Nigel's gaze slowly tracked away from the windows to refocus on her. He blinked, and Jade could see the weariness in his eyes. "I... have found I can't agree with their views. I do not believe we belong on Earth."

Working to keep an edge of irritation out of her voice, Jade replied, "You are entitled to your opinion. Since you want to skip, I assume you are here to petition me to release the ban on off-world travel." She shook her head sternly and added, "You know I can't do that."

"There have been no further attacks with the remaining captured vessels in orbit. No attempts at seizing other ships still on the ground." Nigel said this while holding his hands out in a sign of pleading. "I've spoken with spacecraft engineers. They say the risk to an off-world flight is minimal."

"That may well be," countered Jade, "but those same engineers are still unable to regain control of those remaining ships in orbit. Nor can they give an adequate explanation of how they were reprogrammed in the first place. The safety systems should be invulnerable to tampering. Until we know all our starships are safe, there will be no more flights."

Nigel pursed his lips together but did not continue to argue. He let out a tight, stressful sigh and conceded. "I will not continue to debate you on this point, Seeker Jade. I had hoped you might be
agreeable to allowing our travel to the other colonies. I felt I needed to try. But I knew the current conditions might make such a choice impossible. That is why we have come with a proposal."

"Well I'm glad you see reason," replied Jade. She was about to ask what plan he had in mind when the full meaning of his last sentence sunk in. Stopping herself, she blurted out, "What do you mean by 'we'?"

He was again staring out her window, not meeting her questioning glare. His reply came cautiously, as if unsure he should be answering the question. "There are others, like me, who want to leave. Who believe we don't belong here. That think we were wrong to come to Earth in the first place."

The lack of sleep suddenly pulled on Jade and her body. The press of fatigue weighed her down. Nigel's statement was the last thing she needed to hear. Her own kind were growing impatient, doubting themselves, and doubting their purpose. Contemplating that they were in error. Nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, the horrors of the last few months had proved to Jade her people belonged on Earth more now than ever before. The Humans were a vile, dangerous race. Violent, brutal, and all too willing to inflict their rage on the innocent.

Initially, back when the Souls had first discovered Earth and witnessed humanity's reckless course of overpopulation, starvation, ecological damage, wars, and a gambit of other troubles, her people had seen humans as a race that desperately needed their help. Humanity could grow and prosper under the Souls helpful guidance. If they had not intervened, the peoples of Earth would have surely destroyed themselves and possibly even their beautiful world.

But Jade realized her people had made an error about the Humans. They would always survive, even in the most degrading of conditions. Humans were like…cockroaches. They endured. They were relentless. And the humans' persistent curiosity drove them to look beyond their home and to the stars. They had already taken a few tentative steps off their world when the Souls found them. Humanity's greedy eyes taking in all the many worlds of the cosmos. Left unchecked, how long would it have been before the Humans were metaphorically knocking on the door to the See Weeds' water world? Or the Bats? Or even eventually…Origin? The thought of Humans on her homeworld made Jade shudder.

No, the Humans had to be stopped. Here and now. And yet here was Nigel, representing who knew how many who just wanted to go and leave the threat to others. Jade knew the near future was going to be unpleasant. But her people always wanted to help each other. They could not turn their backs on those who would remain to counter the growing threat on this world. They just had to stay! How could she make Nigel understand this?

Letting out a deep sigh, Jade rolled her slim shoulders against the comforting back of her chair. Addressing Nigel, she began serenely, as much as her exhausted petite figure would allow, to win him over. "I understand there is much distress among much of the populace. Most came to Earth believing, not incorrectly, that this was a settled and safe world. My greatest regret as a Seeker will be our mistaken belief the remaining human population was of no great consequence. Or the few rebellious host bodies we encountered were a minor aberration. If we had known…"

Shaking his head back and forth, Nigel interrupting her. "I do not blame you or any other Seeker. There was no way anyone could have anticipated what was going to happen."

"Then you do understand," said Jade with a smile. "Blaming ourselves for our mistakes does not accomplish anything. We need to come together."

A smile worked its way on to Nigel's face as he nodded in agreement. "Yes…I do wish we could
come together. It would be most beneficial in finding a way to end the conflict with the Humans."

"It will not be easy," agreed Jade. "That is why we must work together. This war will undoubtedly grow worse before conditions improve. There will, unfortunately, need to be great sacrifices for us to triumph over the Humans."

Nigel's face fell. He again looked away, his discomfort quickly returning. "I don't…want to fight them. I don't want to hate the humans…I want to find peace."

Jade felt the muscles in her back tighten again. "There cannot be peace while the Humans exist."

"I do not agree with you."

Nigel's statement hung in the air. A simple counter to all her arguments. She said nothing and stared stonily at him. His dark skin taking on a light sheen of sweat. Gradually his restless eyes eventually refocused on her, as he worked up his courage to say more.

"The Humans want their world back. They want their people back," said Nigel in a near whisper. "I have come to you to try and convince you to open a dialog with the rebels. I would return my host body in trade for safe passage off this world. It's not skipping…not really. An offer to build on for peace. If I am successful, others who agree with me will carry out a similar exchange. In time, I hope, we would find common ground with the Humans."

This was so much worse than she had expected. She had thought Nigel and those he spoke for were merely misguided. But this…it was tantamount to insanity. The sheer absurdity of his request had her jumping to her feet.

"What is wrong with you!?"

Nigel shrank back in his chair from her outburst. "I-I-I understand what I'm asking…" he stammered.

"I don't think you do," snapped Jade as she strode around her desk, coming to stand directly in front of the young Soul. Thrusting her arm out towards the bank of windows on the far side of her office, she pointed with a quivering finger at the still open wounds on the Chicago skyline.

"Look," she commanded, and a very nervous Nigel meekly turned his head towards the shattered remains of skyscrapers. "Look at the destruction they made. Look at the all the death they caused. And you want to negotiate with beings who can do that!?"

"Please," whimpered Nigel, "I don't mean to ignore what happened, but…"

Unheeded, Jade stampeded over his meager protest. "You will be telling them that type of behavior works! You'll show them that if they are barbaric and brutal enough that we'll run away! All you will accomplish is to encourage the humans to make even more attacks! Can you be so blind to not understand those monsters will never stop until we are all dead!"

She was shouting, hands clutched at her sides and spittle flying from her mouth. Nigel was flinching at her every word. Blow after blow, like she was physically striking him. Never had she been so angry in all of her lives.

"Seeker! What is wrong?"

Hannah's panicked words brought Jade out of her rage. Blinking, she shook her head as her emotions cleared. She found her assistant standing in the doorway, white as a sheet. Hannah's eyes
were wide with astonished horror at her screaming tirade. Taking several deep breaths, Jade slowly calmed herself. Peeking down at Nigel showed the man cowering in his chair, visibly trembling.

"Do I need to call for a Healer? Or a Comforter?" asked Hannah as she continued to fret nervously at the doorway.

Jade swallowed with some difficulty. "No," she said hoarsely, "I'm fine. I'm just fine."

Glancing between Jade and Nigel, Hannah nodded, still uncertain. "If...you say so."

Returning her focus to the still shaking Nigel, Jade said stiffly, "I believe Night Ember Lights was just leaving."

The young Soul's eyes never left Jade. Very cautiously he rose, his posture was of one who expected a savage beating at any moment. When it was clear Jade was not going to do anything further, he took a significant step backward. "Yes," he said in a very hushed, frightened tone, "I think it's time for me to go." Then he turned and practically ran from the room.

When he was gone, Jade's whole body waivered in strained exhaustion, and she found herself leaning against her desk to support herself. Hannah was by her side in a scant second, helping to her back into her chair. She gratefully sagged into the smooth leather cushions.

"I will call for a Healer at once," said Hannah as she reached for the phone.

"No," sighed Jade with some of her former calm returning. "I'm alright," she added. When her assistant gave her an uncertain look, Jade repeated, "I am fine. Please don't worry about me."

Hannah's concern relaxed but did not completely go away. "I heard you shouting about the Humans. What did he say to you to make you so upset?"

What indeed. Night Ember Lights ideas were not just naïve, they were dangerous. Their people needed to come together and face this threat as one. The Souls could not afford the luxury of debate or opposing opinions. That would be a weakness the Humans would be quick to exploit. And by his own admission, Night Ember Lights said he represented other Souls who felt the same way. Jade felt a rising sense of worry begin in the pit of her stomach. She had been so consumed dealing with the danger posed by the Human Resistance, she had failed to see a growing problem with her own people. It seemed Wander's insane influence lingered on.

Not directly answering Hannah's question, Jade replied, "Night Ember Lights has some... disturbing ideas." No need to allow anyone else to become exposed to such notions. She sat up and began jotting out a blank pad of paper. This would have to be handled delicately. "I need you to take this letter to Seeker Branson. He's been busy with training new Seekers. But this will take priority. He will need to monitor Night Ember Lights...covertly."

"You mean we're going to...spy on him?" asked Hannah with a nervous squeak. "Shouldn't we talk to a Comforter? If he's having problems...shouldn't we try to help him?"

"I'm afraid Night Ember Lights is beyond the help of a Comforter," she answered morosely. Poor Nigel. It was a pity he had been corrupted by the Wander and her pet humans. Jade knew what she had to do. She finished writing down her instructions and handed it to Hannah. "Branson must determine just how many have fallen under Night Ember Lights sway. Make sure he understands he will need to gather this information as fast as he can."

Hannah took the note, still looking more than a little uneasy at the idea of intrusively monitoring other Souls. "It will be okay," offered Jade with a small smile. "We just need to make sure we
know who else has been affected. That's the only way to correct the problem. You understand, don't you? We all need to work together. We can't afford to become…distracted."

Hannah faltered for a moment, "Y-Yes, if you say so." Then pausing, it was clear she was thinking over Jade's appeal for harmony. She nodded once, much more firmly. "I'll contact Seeker Branson right away."

Jade felt a true smile form on her lips. "Thank you, Hannah. I don't know what I would do without you."

Returning her smile, Hannah promptly exited Jade's office, on her way to speak with Seeker Branson. Jade returned to looking out the window. By now the sun had climbed higher in the sky and the earlier rosy colors of the morning had faded. Enough time had been wasted with crazy ideas. But her conversation with Night Ember Lights had given Jade something she had needed - resolve.

Her eyes tracked back to her desk and to the folder labeled Madison, Wisconsin. Now she picked it up and opened the file without hesitation. It was past time she showed the humans just how far the Souls were willing to go to win.

###

Doctor Jennifer Dobson briskly marched down the underground corridor. Sharp clicks came from her heels on its stone floor. Her report on Owen Mitchell was tucked tightly under her arm. As she walked, she passed an open doorway into one of the labs. Inside, four technicians were busy loading the latest batch of CURE into aerosol dispensers. Preparing it to be shipped to the front lines. There was a clock on the far wall of the workshop. Jennifer gave a worried glance at the time, ten past eleven. She was running late for the status meeting.

There was a time, back when Major Donald Ashby was running the Facility, she hated going to the weekly assemblies of the department heads. They had mainly been dull, pointless, endeavors. Where Ashby and Directors Smith and Lance would trade barbs and accusations with each other. And more often than not nothing was accomplished. Yet now she dreaded the meetings for an entirely different reason. Everything had changed since Alex's coup. He had transformed these gatherings. They had become a place where the lives of millions were planned and deliberated upon. And the fates of two races decided. You could not have higher stakes.

Her work on Owen Mitchell and his most unusual circumstances had taken a good deal of her day. What she had learned had forced her to rethink many things. The report she carried on him was remarkable. At least from a scientific standpoint. But how it would be received by Alex and the others was unknowable.

It made Jennifer nervous. She felt the anxious tightening in her stomach as she approached the entrance to the large conference room. She slowed and took a moment to settle herself. Making an emotional connection to one of her medical subjects was dangerous. Her work was often… unpleasant, but necessary. For now, she could not afford to be worried about Owen's fate.

Upon opening the door, Jennifer found the others had started without her. Their attention was focused on Henry Timens. He stood at the far side of the room giving his weekly report. Behind him, covering nearly the entire wall was a huge widescreen video monitor. It displayed an enlarged map of North America. Henry was gesturing at the screen, presenting information on the latest troop movements. Everyone else was seated around a large oval hardwood table. It took up a
Alex sat at the head of the table. Neil Lenson to his right. Then came Bill Lance, Anna Dangy, Elijah Copper, Evelyn Geer, and Isaac Burton. Her friends and colleagues, at least they had been. As her gaze ran around the room, she saw one other figure in the room.

Paz, as usual, stood in the far corner. As strange as it sounded, the alien was often overlooked during their meetings. The Vulture would position himself away from the humans, standing nearly as still as stone. Just watching them with his eerie red-yellow eyes. Unblinking and unnerving.

Alex was speaking as Jennifer managed to slip in quietly and take her seat. She lay her report on Owen before her and refocused her attention to the young man at the head of the table.

"I'm not too concerned," Alex was saying dismissively to Henry. "Manheim will come around in time."

"Hopefully sooner than later," replied Henry. Picking up a remote used for controlling the monitor, he changed the on-screen map. Soon the video was zooming in on the west coast of America. Within a few moments, the picture was centering on the lower portion of California. Henry worked the controls, and the city of Los Angeles highlighted on the map. "Now," he said, "moving on to a less pleasant topic."

A round of angry muttering came from those seated at the table. Neil was first to put a voice to their collective complaints. "Please tell me someone has shot that son-of-a-bitch Williams."

"No such luck," reported Henry. "If anything, he's solidifying his power base in the city."

Jennifer mused on Agent Craig Williams. His mutiny in LA had been the one black mark in their ongoing success of taking back Earth. Everything had been going so well. The captured starships had performed better than their most optimistic predictions. Globally the parasites were reeling, they could not even fathom what had happened. Using unfolding chaos, the Facility had dispersed their CURE drug on the nearby Seekers. Turning them from enemy to new allies. At the same time, those who had launched the opening salvo from Atlanta and Dallas returned on stolen shuttles, adding to their newly born army.

But not from Los Angeles. They had sent off the reprogramed spaceships but then went silent. Concerns that something had gone wrong quickly grew to dumbfounded amazement as they witnessed on live TV Craig Williams, flanked by dozens of armed soldiers march into downtown LA. Blatantly daring the Seekers to respond.

And respond they did. The parasites' militia forces had massed from the nearby cities and swarmed into LA. Yet they were quickly pushed back. Not by the humans, but by their own kind. Williams had taken thousands of cryotanks and the frozen parasites within hostage. His command was simple, submit to us, and no one will be hurt. Disobey, and I'll burn hundreds of sleeping kin. He had demonstrated his willingness to carry out his threat several times to the traumatized Souls.

Faced with a battle that would quickly kill tens of thousands, the nonviolent parasites in LA had opted for an attempted peaceful resolution. Williams had then dragged out the negotiations as he knew what was coming. The Facility's newly raised army beat back the Seekers at Iron Mountain. Soon victory after victory went to humanity's forces. The parasites began to realize they would not so easily win. Reluctantly they took Craig's offer of protection for those in the city.

"I'll still can't believe the buggers are willing to work with Williams," griped Lance as the heavyset director of research glowered at the map.
"They don't have a lot of choice in the matter," answered Neil. "They're putting nearly all their forces into fighting us. They don't have enough Seekers left to spread around."

"He's just damn lucky most of these worms are cowards and can't tell the difference between the end of a gun and a hole in their heads," grunted Lance.

"True enough," agreed Alex. "But I think we can all agree the situation in LA is untenable," said Alex. "We can't allow this to continue. So, the question is – How do we stop Williams?"

Appraising the projected map of Los Angeles, Henry said, "From what we've been able to gather, Williams has started to rely on what remained of the drug cartels that were hiding from the Souls. They were holed up in the Sierra Madre mountains in Mexico. Now they seemed to be basically hired guns. That could be an avenue for us to exploit."

Henry stopped, and a growing thoughtful expression started on his face. "Still, you must admit, it's rather remarkable what Williams has managed to pull off." This earned him a few questionable looks from many around the table. Unruffled by their reactions, he continued speaking.

"Think about it, our reports show there are roughly three million parasites in LA. While Craig has about five thousand people. That's way less than 1% of the city's population. And yet, he has nearly total control over them. They'll do almost anything he says. Their altruistic nature makes them willing to bend over backward. Sacrifice their freedom for the continued safety of the captured cryotanks."

"So what?" questioned Isaac. The biologist's face was a mask of clear contempt. "We aren't interested in controlling the buggers. We want to get rid of them."

Shrugging, Henry looked away from the map. His response came in a soft reply as he stared at the dark stained wood of the meeting tabletop, his eyes unreadable. "Maybe that's a little shortsighted."

His answer brought a renewed chorus of whispers and unhappy muttering from around the room. Jennifer could see a tightening of Henry's neck and shoulders. He finally met the others' annoyed glares. "I'm just saying...you know...we could use some of them. With the people we can't recover. Once we eliminate the Seeker caste and remove the parasites who can reproduce, we'd completely control their population. Reduce their numbers, and we have a ready to go working class. One that was compliant and malleable."

Henry finished and looked around to gauge everyone's reactions. Most just stared at him blankly. Jennifer resisted letting out a sigh of contempt. Henry was suggesting turning the Souls into a slave race. Regardless of her feelings about the parasites, she did not care for slavery, in any form. But the answer that finally came surprised everyone.

"No."

The artificial voice of Paz floated across the room. The Vulture was still standing in the corner, nearly as motionless as a statue. His large alien eyes still scrutinizing them with unknowable intent. It was so rare for the alien to speak during one of their meetings. His single word response left Henry's mouth open, gaping in surprise.

Silence filled the room. Then with a hum, the portable translator around Paz's head sparked back to life. The Vulture was not done speaking. "You should not waiver from your efforts to expel the parasites from your world. As pliable as they may appear, their existence will always constitute an unacceptable threat."
Alex glanced at Paz and Henry and nodded slowly to himself. "Yes, certainly," he said. "We need to keep our focus. We can't afford to get distracted with unnecessary ideas."

Looking thoroughly chastised, Henry meekly hunched down into his seat and said nothing further. Lance swiveled in his chair and regarded Alex. "That still leaves what we're going to do with LA."

Several of people around the table offered suggestions, ranging from sending in a covert team to assassinate the LA Free Zone's ruling board to using one of the still orbiting Soul spaceships as another kinetic weapon to destroy the city. As they debated, Jennifer noticed Paz was slowly advancing towards the displayed map of LA. This was very unusual for the Vulture. She could not recall a time when the alien had ever come out his corner when they were all gathered.

Jennifer found herself securitizing the alien as he closed the distance. The scientist in her automatically kicking into high gear. She gazed at the creature, eyeing the strange and unknown biology. Skin – dark grey and scaly, but not like a reptile. Instead, it was smooth and glossy, similar to an insect's body. His long thin frame spoke of evolution on a planet with a weaker gravity. Large yellow-red eyes made for a world with a dimmer sun, peered out from a wrinkled shrunken head. Misshapen from a human's point of view. The Vulture's head blended seamlessly into the narrow chest, no neck at all. She wondered if the black wings folded on his back would let the alien actually take flight. Probably not on Earth, but on a different planet, with a thicker atmosphere it might be possible.

It did not take long for the others to see the Facility's benefactor approaching. Alex's attention promptly refocused on the alien as he came to a stop within a few feet of the map. Clearly concerned at this strange behavior, Alex asked, "Paz, is there a problem?"

The Vulture made a slow bob of his shriveled head with his long body hunching forward. A bizarre and inhuman motion. Then a series of clicks and gulps came from the lips less mouth, but Paz's translator did not provide an English version of his words. Everyone around the table exchanged confused glances, unsure what to do.

But not Alex, he reacted to the incomprehensible alien words. He stood up and quickly closed the distance to Paz. "I know he was your friend," said Alex softly. "I'm sorry things went wrong in LA."

Jennifer made a quick mental note. Alex's response would seem to confirm her theory he had learned some of the alien's language. His answer also added to the rumor that Paz had not taken the apparent death of the Vulture Asag very well. She had heard he had flown into a wild rage when their forces from LA had failed to return.

She saw subtle glances from those around the table. They too had heard the gossip and feared what Paz might do. It was so hard to gauge what emotions might be brewing in the creature's strange eyes. But this time whatever fury the Vulture felt towards Craig Williams and his rebellion was carefully under control.

"You will do nothing," came Paz's translated words as the Vulture continued to scrutinize the map of Los Angles. "Without our support, Williams's forces will eventually weaken. Their minds will decay. Yet it is a worthy distraction. The parasites will expend much time to reclaim the city."

An awkward silence followed. More worried glances between the Facility's directors. This was unprecedented. Never had Paz or any of the Vultures so clearly given them orders. Before it had always been suggestions, recommendations, or convincing proposals. Slowly all at the table turned to face Alex. He was the one who had forged the new alliance between Humans and the Vultures after the failure of Ashby's reign.
At the center of everyone's attention, for a scant few seconds, Alex looked uncertain and a little bit frightened. Appearing no more than the young man he was, not their ever-confident leader. But then he took back control. "Thank you, Paz," said Alex swiftly. "And everyone else's for their input. I'll soon make a decision about LA."

He had neatly sidestepped the issue, and Paz gave no indication he had noted their brief apprehension. Or if the alien had noticed, he did not care. Others around the room seemingly shrugged it off. Willing to believe Alex was still in control. Jennifer felt a rise of anger. She wanted to scream at all them. They were all being used. The Vultures were planning something. A final solution, she was sure of it. How could they be so blind?

"...Doctor Dobson?"

She jerked in her chair, realizing Alex was calling on her. Glancing around she saw from the expressions on Lance's and Neil's faces, he had already called her name more than once. His hazel eyes were on her. Waiting. Expectant.

"I'm sorry," she said swiftly as she forced her outrage back down. "Just a hectic morning."

"Yes," replied Alex. "I saw you come in late. You have everything ready for your presentation? I've been very interested in your latest test subject."

Taking a few more seconds to settle herself, Jennifer stood and said with remarkable calm. "I am. If I could have everyone's attention to the wall screen, I'll start."

Walking over to the widescreen display, she took the controls and loaded her presentation. A moment later the screen flashed from the map of Los Angeles to show the round face of a young man with a cheerful smile. His thick dark hair neatly matched the dark suit he was wearing. The words 'FBI' was labeled in yellow across his jacket's front left side.

"While some of you are familiar with this case," began Jennifer, "I'll give a summary for everyone's benefit. Pictured here is Owen Mitchell, at age twenty-six. When he was an FBI Agent based out of the Washington DC Office."

She clicked a button on the remote, and a new picture appeared. It was again Owen Mitchell. He still had his happy smile, a dense thicket of black hair, and dark suit. But the FBI logo was gone from the coat, and when you looked carefully at his picture, a gleam of silver ringed his pupils. "This is Owen the Seeker," explained Jennifer. "Our captured records from the parasites indicate he was converted during their initial takeover of our government. For the next nine years, he carried out mostly administrative work at their headquarters. Earlier this year, in response to our incursions in Chicago, he was reassigned to a task force to hunt us down."

There was a gentle chuckle from those in the room. Jennifer advanced to the next photo. Again Owen Mitchell. He still had his happy smile, a dense thicket of black hair, and dark suit. But the FBI logo was gone from the coat, and when you looked carefully at his picture, a gleam of silver ringed his pupils. "This is Owen the Seeker," explained Jennifer. "Our captured records from the parasites indicate he was converted during their initial takeover of our government. For the next nine years, he carried out mostly administrative work at their headquarters. Earlier this year, in response to our incursions in Chicago, he was reassigned to a task force to hunt us down."

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"This picture was taken on day two after his exposure to CURE at Iron Mountain. Owen's physical checkup showed everything was normal. Initial scans of his brain indicated the neuroplasticity changes were occurring as planned. Records show that on day eight the parasite was removed and terminated. Owen then opted to join our army, taking part in battles at Grand Rapids and Detroit."
Jennifer again paused, letting her words sink into those around the room. She knew most were aware of these facts, but what she was about to say had deemed sensitive information. Only Neil and Alex had all the details. She could only guess how much Paz and the other Vultures knew.

"However, the records are wrong," she stated evenly. "Owen never had the parasite removed from his body. On day four, for reasons unknown, it woke up."

"What do you mean – it woke up?" asked Lance with a confused scowl.

"Just that," replied Jennifer. "The neural inhibitor designed to keep the parasites dormant failed in Owen. The Soul regained consciousness."

"At four days, immunity to the parasite's control would still be forming in his brain," put in Isaac. The doctor leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, deep in thought as he worked through the implications. "Jen, are you saying he was taken over again?" he questioned.

Jennifer shook her head. "Not exactly. At first, the parasite was awake, but it did not have power over the body. It was limited to only seeing and hearing what Owen experienced. In time, this changed. Within one day of waking up, the parasite could communicate directly with Owen. By day fifteen there appeared…"

"What in the hell?" barked Lance as he interrupted her. He hurled questions out, each one growing more aggrieved. "If this happened at day five, why didn't Mitchell report it right away? Why the hell lie about removing the bugger? And just how long did this insanity go on?"

Neil answered for her. "Sixty days."

Lance was on his feet, his face going red with agitated incredulity. "Are you telling me for two months this guy was running around - in our own army no less - with one these damn worms chattering in his head? Do we have any idea how much damaged this could have caused!?"

"Bill, enough" admonished Alex. "We've got it handled." His response was sharp but still smoothed out in a patient and certain measure. "Neil has exhaustively reviewed everything Mr. Mitchell did while in the army. At no point did he reach out to the Seekers. And we've got a tight lid on anyone who worked with Owen. No one, outside the squad he was assigned to, has any idea about what happened."

With an unhappy grunt, the older man sat down. Henry spoke up next. "Then how was Owen found out? He was obviously hiding what had happened to him. Did the parasite eventually regain control of his body?"

"That was our original assessment," replied Neil. "During a sweep of the outer suburbs of Detroit, Owen was discovered to be assisting a group of hiding parasites. He was attempting to get them to territory still held by their kind. At the time his eyes displayed that silver glow when you shine a flashlight in their faces. Owen's own team almost put a bullet in his head, but cooler heads prevailed. He was turned over to us and didn't take long before it became obvious the situation with Owen was very unusual."

"How so?" asked Elijah Copper. The dark-skinned engineer swiveled his gaze between Neil and Jennifer. "Are we looking at a single case of CURE failing? Or is there something different about this guy?"

Putting her report back on track, Jennifer cut in before anyone could ask more questions. "I believe the video of my first interview with Owen is…revealing. I'll play it now, and I think it will answer
some questions."

Working the remote, her video began and swiftly resolved into a blank grey wall with a single chair at the center of the frame. The chair's backrest reclined at a forty-five-degree angle. Thick cushioned pads wrapped around the armrests and the seat. Giving it the appearance of comfort to anyone who sat in it. But looks were most certainly deceiving. Heavy Velcro straps hung from the arm and headrests. Untied belted restraints laid lose on the chair's seat. All designed to hold someone in place, no matter how strong they might be. Off to the right side of the chair stood LCD monitor connected to a large white rounded case. A few dials and buttons on its front. You could almost make out the faded letters "EEG" on its side. From the box's back end, more than two dozen thin cords lead to an empty rubber cap, studded with round silver steel disks about the size of a dime.

A few brief seconds went by, and then a figure in a simple one-piece blue jumpsuit was lead into the room by two guards. Despite having his thick black hair shaved off, his round face was easily recognizable. Owen was on the shorter size, only about five-foot-five. He did not give much resistance as he was pushed into the chair, nor did he fight back when the straps were unceremoniously tightened until the belts and Velcro held him fast. With his clean-shaven head, the overhead lights gleamed of his pasty skin. There was an almost grey tone to his flesh, neatly mirroring the drab colored wall behind him.

Jennifer watched herself move into frame and pick up the rubber cap from the nearby machine. With a little effort, she wrapped it around Owen's skull until it was tightly in place. Dozens of electrodes protruded from the stretched elastic cover, like shiny steel polka dots. After she was done, she disappeared off screen for a few seconds, the sound of her voice echoing far enough away that video camera did not record her words.

Owen just sat in the chair, unmoving. A look of exhausted despair etched on his features. Within a few moments, the onscreen Jennifer returned and switched on the monitoring device. After making several adjustments to the EEG machine, she took her seat.

"Now," came her voice as she addressed the man seated before her, "for the record, your name is Owen Mitchell. Age thirty-eight. Born in Washington DC."

His reply to her questions was a single monotone word - "Yes."

"The parasite you carry originally has a very complicated name, difficult to pronounce, and chose to adopt yours. So, it is also called Owen?"

He made a tiny nod of his head. "Yep, he's the other me."

"That doesn't get confusing for you? Two identities with the same name? Or anger you that it stole your name?"

Several seconds ticked by and Owen made no effort to answer. His eyes were distant, focused on nothing. The on-screen Jennifer waited patiently, making several notes of EEG monitor. Meanwhile, Jennifer in the meeting annotated what she was doing in the video. "I monitored several bursts of activity in his temporal lobe and a corresponding frequency change in the parasite center thorax. This area is associated with the aliens' higher thought processes."

"They're talking to each other," surmised Alex. His eyes never left the screen.

"Yes," agreed Jennifer.
Back on the video, Owen finally answered her. "Nope, strange as it sounds I was kind of flattered he kept my name. And it's not been confusing to either of us. I know I'm Owen and he knows he's Owen. We're two separate minds, just with the same name."

"You are in continual communication with each other?"

This time Owen did not hesitate to answer. "Yeah, pretty much all the time."

"Since the time the parasite regained awareness, was there any point when you couldn't hear it?"

A faint grimace broke on Owen's face. "Back in the beginning, when he first woke up. I was good and pissed at him. We really had it out. Well, as much as you can have a screaming fight inside your own skull. For a little while, I forced him back down and kept him quiet. But that didn't last."

"Why not?"

"First, it was hard to do. Like trying to hold tight a coiled spring. I had to focus to do it. And second…it hurt."

Jennifer watched herself pick up a notepad and jot down some notes. "Where was the pain located? A single point or multiple areas?" asked the recorded version of herself to Owen.

"No, not that type of pain. Not physical. It was…emotional."

She stopped writing. "What do you mean?"

A sigh welled up from Owen. "Look, Doc, I get you guys aren't happy about me hiding Owen or helping that Soul family. But what you got to understand, is while we may be two separate minds, our emotions are pretty much jumbled together. So, what hurts him, hurts me. And the other way around."

"Holding him down just made his pain greater. I felt his anguish and guilt over what he did to me. And he felt my anger. It made us both sick. After a while I just couldn't stay that way. We had to make peace with each other."

"And that's your excuse for not reporting it's reawakening? Or undermining the army? Because the parasite made you feel sad?"

A brief laugh escaped Owen's mouth. "Sure, whatever. I get the feeling you and the rest of the psychos down in this hole have already made up your minds about us. The only good parasite is a dead one, am I right?"

"No one has made any type of decision about you, Mister Mitchell," Jennifer coolly refuted. "We simply want to understand what has happened to you."

"Oh, is that all? Well damn, we should have run straight here," came Owen's sarcastic response. "Could have had the lovely experience of your jail cells right away. Or the fun of your little Nazi Lenson and his stupid mustache."

Despite Neil's presence - or possibly because the secretly loathed security director was at the table - a snicker of laughter came from around the room at the insult. Jennifer saw out of the corner of her eye Neil's face darken. She suppressed a smile. The joke was juvenile and frivolous, but it was satisfying to see Lenson squirm in embarrassment for a few moments. But Owen's retort had led to an opening for her to dig deeper into the man's dual mind.
"Well, why didn't you run?" came her voice from the recording as she continued to question Owen. On screen, her eyes never left the EEG readouts. Peculiar dips and jogs in the graphs showed something very unusual was happening the man's brain. "You can see from our perspective how strange it was you continued to fight the parasites, all the while you were protecting one of them. Makes the idea you were attempting to be some sort of double agent not so far-fetched."

"It wasn't like that," shot back Owen. "We argued about joining the army. Debated what to do. But the truth was Owen had come to believe his kind was wrong to come here. Reluctantly he agreed to help me. He was hoping we could keep the bloodshed to a minimum. But in time it became clear to us that slaughter was the only fate awaiting the Souls."

"You use the words we, us, quite a lot," mused Jennifer. "Is that how you see yourselves? A dual mind? A collective consciousness?"

"I...we...I don't....," stammered Owen. He took a breath and continued. "To be honest, I don't know what to think. Neither does Owen."

In the recording, Jennifer looked up from the instruments and focused directly on Owen. "Can I speak with it? The other Owen?" He quickly looked away and did not meet her eyes. "There's no point in denying it," she said. "We have multiple witnesses reporting seeing you change. Your eyes reverting to looking like a person controlled by a parasite. The reflective silver. And a different personality and mannerism. Do you control the change? Or does the parasite?"

"It takes both of us," Owen reluctantly answered. "Sort of a mutual effort."

"Interesting. I very much would like to see this transformation."

"I...err...he doesn't want to."

"Why not?" asked Jennifer.

"He's scared of you. And also, he doesn't like being called an It."

Her recorded double let out a laugh. "Very well, I promise to stop saying it or parasite."

Owen still looked uncertain, leading her to ask, "Why do you still hesitate?"

"Changing can hurt. A real pain, not emotional."

The recording showed her hand quickly jotted down more notes. Around the table, Jennifer saw people leaning forward in their seats, their attention wholly focused on the video. Even Paz seemed riveted by the bizarre conversation. Everything about Owen's case defied a simple explanation. He was in the middle of describing the physical sensations of the change, sharp stabbing pain in the right temple when she paused the playback. He froze, mid-sentence. His human eyes still filled with a tired sadness.

Addressing those in the room, she outlined what she had learned from this first interview. "You can see in my report that during this time, there was a regular level of activity between Owen and the parasite. Specifically, an odd repeating delta wave of approximately 2.5 hertz began whenever Owen referred to the parasite."

A frown came to Alex's face as he continued to stare at the video screen. "Aren't delta brain waves tied to REM sleep?"

"They are," she agreed. "But they also appear in temporal lobe epilepsy. Which is very close to
what is about to happen to Mr. Mitchell."

Unpausing the playback, Jennifer turned back to the display just as Owen began his change. He closed his eyes tight and then a shudder ran through his entire body. A spasming of all his body's muscles. At the same time the EEG monitor's spiked in activity. The readouts spinning back and forth erratically. The recorded Jennifer gapped in open amazement at the output. But as quickly as Owen's seizure started, it stopped. Lasting no more than five seconds. Then he slowly opened his eyes, and now they held a sheen of bright silver.

On-screen Jennifer took a moment to compose herself at what she had witnessed. At length, she said, "Owen the Soul, I presume."

He exhaled a deep breath and looked her way with his strange eyes. "Yes," he said in a soft voice.

She nodded at the confirmation and asked, "Owen described the process of switching states as being painful. Is it the same for you?"

"We feel everything equally," replied the Soul. "Happiness, grief, fear, and yes…pain."

"Does that bother you? Being attached at the hip, so to speak, to a human?"

His shaved head wrinkled with confusion. "Why would that bother me?"

Sitting back in her chair, she tapped her pen against her notepad. "Well, it's our understanding your kind see an uncontrolled host as undesirable. That it's a sign of weakness if you can't manage a host body. I would think being tied to a human where you are regulated to little more than a voice in his head as intolerable. All his unwanted emotions dumped upon you."

He looked down at the floor apparently pondering her question. Without looking up, he replied in his soft and gentle voice. "Maybe at the beginning I did. It was so strange for me. And…Owen was so angry. It was frightening. I just wanted my life back. But Owen pointed out that I had stolen his life, maybe I should learn how it feels."

With a shake of his head, he looked up. "Until recently I had never really thought about that. Seeing things from our hosts' perspective. I've had to…rethink many things. Put aside old ideas as we got…umm…comfortable with each other."

"So, what do you want now? To stay with Owen? Or leave him?"

A heavy sigh welled up in his body. "What does it matter? You're going to kill us. Slice us apart as you seek to learn why this happened."

With an indifferent shrug, she replied. "As I told Owen, we've made no decisions on your fate. We're just asking questions." To give a bit of reassurance she added, "We can learn quite a lot without having to cut up anyone."

Another unhappy sigh escaped him. "I don't believe you."

He then tilted his head slightly, as if he was listening to an unheard voice. Which in his case, was most indeed happening. "Owen says you're full of…" He paused, and his face reddened slightly. "Well, I don't want to say the rest. It's not very nice. But we both agree you're not telling us the truth."

With her attention on the video, Jennifer did not see Anna Dangy lean forward in her chair. She brought her hand down on the table hard enough to make an attention-getting thump. "Jen," she
asked, "how long can the parasite remain in control?"

Stopping the video, Jennifer replied, "I had four separate interviews spanning over five hours. During this time, the parasite was in control for nearly half of the time. I believe if Owen, the human, is agreeable, the other Owen can remain in control all the time."

"We going to run through all five hours?" questioned a bored sounding Anna.

"I don't think we need to go through all of it," replied Jennifer. "I have summaries in my report, and transcripts of our conversations if needed. But I felt it was important to at least see his transformation for yourselves. Most of the rest deals with specific aspects of their dual existence. I do believe I eventually gained a limited amount of trust from Owen."

With a laugh, Lance asked, "Which one?"

"The human, of course," she lied with a slight smile. It really was getting effortless to spin tales to her colleagues. She had been doing it so much lately. Then again, she was telling them what they expected to hear. To say she had slowly won the trust of Owen the Soul, and his revelations of some fascinating truths to her was most certainly not something she would be repeating.

Alex steepled his fingers together, and his eyes became unfocused as he stared off into the distance. Something he did when deep in thought. "Jen, do you know why this happened? What went wrong in Owen's brain? Or is not him at all? Was something different about his parasite?"

"Yes, at least in part," replied Jennifer. "I found some unusual cellular structures in Mr. Mitchell's brain. Seemingly malformed neurons with mutated dendrites."

She switched the screen from the paused video of Owen to a page from her report. It pictured a drawing outlining the structure of a human brain cell. The main body of the cell, the perikaryon, was situated in the middle of the screen. It contained the nucleus and other parts of a typical cell. Growing out from this center mass was nearly a dozen tree-like structures, the dendrites. Also, there was one long branch, stretching out from the central neuron's body, the axon. The dendrites and axon were the primary parts of the cell allowing it to communicate with neighboring neurons.

"Pictured here is a typical neuron found in a human brain," explained Jennifer. Switching the on-screen image, she continued, "And this is what I found in Owen."

The cell shown was like the previous image. The main body of the neuron was still present, but branches of the dendrites were longer and thinner. Almost thread-like, weaving back and forth in an intricate pattern. The axon was even stranger, it was further elongated. Becoming a long trailing tail. And it was silver.

"If I didn't know better," said Alex, "I'd say that cell looks a bit like one of those tentacles on a parasite."

Jennifer gave him a brief smile. "You're not wrong. We're looking a mutated neuron that's taken on traits of the parasite's own body."

Isaac was quick to respond to her revelation "How in the hell is that possible? The parasites' cell structure is radically different from ours. Are we saying there is some sort of DNA transference going on here?"

"None that I've been able to detect," said Jennifer. "Everything I've seen in Owen's brain is completely human genetic material. But I'm still testing. There could be a form genomic transfer going on that we're unfamiliar with."
"And these screwed up neurons are what's letting Owen and the parasite play musical chairs with his body?" asked Lance.

"I believe so," said Jennifer. "I think we are seeing some form of new…" and she drew out a breath as she considered the right word. "…Integration between host and parasite," she finally settled on as a description for Owen's unusual ability. "Unlike anything we've seen in over a decade of research."

From around the table, several people spoke at the same time. Isaac with half a dozen inquiries on her techniques used for evaluating the cellular mutation. Anna asked if there was any way to reverse the process. Lance stated they needed to take decisive action and pull the parasite out of Owen at once. She was trying to balance the inundation of questions when the machine clipped voice of Paz came from behind her.

"Doctor Dobson."

Startled, Jennifer swung around in her chair to find the Vulture was standing over her, staring down at her with his eerie alien eyes. Her heart lurched into her throat as his gaze bore into her. Never had she been this close to the creature. She worked very hard to suppress a shudder.

"I-I am sorry?" she managed to stammer out.

Clicks and grunts came from the Vulture, and a moment later the translator conveyed - "Has your research provided a way to detect these cellular anomalies remotely?"

Puzzlement pushed back some of her fear. "Remotely?"

More alien language hissed from Paz's lipless mouth, followed by the translation. "Can the mutation be detected in another human without the need of a detailed brain scan?"

"Well," she began and then hesitated for a good thirty seconds as she tried to get her mind back into working order. "It is possible," she said at last. "The abnormalities in Owen's brain have produced a heightened protein level of cytokine in his immune system. In theory, a blood test could be created to detect these changes."

"Excellent," came the rendered response from Paz. "Transfer all relevant data to me."

Without thinking, she blurted out, "But why? Who else would have such a change…. Unless there were…more like Owen."

Without warning the Vulture hunched forward, his long thin body bending down until his shrunken head with large luminous eyes were staring her straight in the face. She could feel his icy cold breath on her cheeks. Shrinking back into her chair, she cast a frantic look back and forth to the others. They sat, frozen in their seats, stunned into silence.

Long seconds ticked by as Paz's eyes bore into her. She felt like they were drilling away into her soul. She had tripped into something the Vultures did not want to discuss. In a desperate effort to assuage whatever line she had crossed she spluttered, "I-I j-just meant i-if you wanted to m-make sure there were no others…"

"Yesss," hissed Paz. "Nooo othersss…"

A dumbfounded hush followed from everyone as they heard Vulture speak without his translator for the first time. The silence went on until Jennifer thought she might scream. But then slowly Paz straightened upright and shuffled backward.
As he withdrew, he spoke again, but this time in the usual artificial voice. "You have done well Doctor Dobson. But this project is at an end. Purge all data and eliminate the test subject."

She finally found her voice. "But there's still more I could learn. I'm close to understanding how the mutation started in Owen."

"Irrelevant. Terminate the test subject immediately," commanded Paz.

This was much worse than she feared. The pretenses of Alex's control over the Vultures was fast slipping away. And Owen's life was in the gravest of dangers. She was sure If she even gave a mere hint of disobedience, Paz would have her removed. No one would stop it, and Owen would still die. Everyone in this room had given themselves over. Even Alex. They were all obedient dogs before their master.

Jennifer swallowed hard and found what slivers of courage she still had in her. Calmly and coolly she replied, "Yes. I'll see to it at once."

###

The Humvee speed down the empty street, vacant houses, shops, and stores whizzed by as General Patrick Manheim gazed out the passenger window. Here and there on the road, a few cars sat abandoned. Beside him, Wyatt, his driver, effortlessly navigated around the obstructions. His eyes restlessly scanning the vacant streets of Madison, continually searching for any sign of danger.

"Sir," said Wyatt as they turned on to a street just as barren as the last one. "I'd really wish you'd sit in the back. The armor is stronger back there. You'd be safe. We don't know if the buggers left any traps behind."

Patrick turned from the window and regarded Wyatt. The man was in his early twenties. With his grey-green helmet and matching combat uniform, he appeared to be a fresh-faced soldier like so many others in the army. Patrick had to remind himself that Wyatt was actually not the same. He had never been a host for the alien Souls. Wyatt and his parents had managed to escape the Seekers. They had hidden in the forest of northern Canada. Only after Souls' starships fell and the cities had burned did they return. They had all quickly joined up with resistance's army. Wyatt's father was quite proficient with a rifle. He was already one of Manheim's best snipers. And his mother was proving to be an effective instructor for new recruits. Spending years isolated in the icy cold deep woodlands had turned Wyatt and his family into hardened survivors.

But Wyatt had also grown up seeing a city as a place of great danger, where their enemy made its home. That instinct did not quickly go away. "It's alright, solider," said Manheim. "I'll be fine."

"If you say so, sir," replied an uncertain Wyatt.

Their destination lay ahead, the brick and gleaming glass structure of Madison's main hospital. Residing in downtown, it had served the Seekers defending the town as their primary healing center. The hospital had also been one of their last lines of defense.

The Humvee slowed to a crawl before the hospital's main entrance and Manheim was already opening the passenger door before they had come to a complete stop. His driver began to offer another protest about his safety, but Manheim cut him off. "Leave it running and wait here," he commanded.

Outside the hospital a dozen soldiers dressed for combat guarded the entrance. There was a tension
in their bodies as Manheim approached. He could see it so easily. A wary, uncertainty that shaded their expressions and lent a stiffness to their postures. If the circumstances were different, he would believe they were preparing to storm into battle.

But there had been no battle today.

Giving them a quick salute, Manheim said bluntly, "Report."

One of the soldiers gave him a crestfallen answer, "It's the same here, General. The buggers are all dead."

Their recon forces had begun to push into Madison just after dawn. They had made their way past junked cars and other hastily constructed barricades blocking the roads. Probing deeper into the city. No resistance was encountered. He and Durant had quickly arrayed their forces around the city, ensuring there would be no escape for the parasites. But a counterattack from the Souls never came.

Then the first bodies were spotted. Two men and a woman were discovered on a porch of a two-story house. The three were gathered together, holding each other's hands. With dried rivulets of blood coming from their noses and ears. The spectacle was so off-putting, seeing three dead bodies sitting comfortably on padded wicker lawn furniture, obstinately in the middle of a war zone that the discovering soldiers had at first thought it was some sort of trap. But nothing else had been found. From their sitting position, it seemed likely the three Souls had watched the sunrise and then killed themselves.

A parasite committing suicide had been seen before. Usually when one of them was cornered, where there was no escape. It was why CURE was so crucial to the army. The drug's ability to rapidly incapacitate the alien worm inside a human host had already saved countless lives. At first, it was thought the three parasites had seen the inevitability of the city's fall to the Humans and ended their lives unusually early. But soon more bodies were found. Many more.

Sensing a growing disaster, he had ordered the army into Madison. A mad dash ensued, soldiers poured into the city. Canisters of CURE at the ready to be used on any parasite still alive. But they were too late.

"You two, with me," ordered Manheim to the soldier who had answered him and another standing nearby. They fell in behind him as he shoved open one of the hospital's door and strode forward. Inside the main lobby stood still and silent. Without power, dark shadows ruled this space. The only sound came from the three men's boot treading on the polished tiled floor.

"Two teams are going through the rest of the hospital, looking for anyone or anything of use," spoke up the first man as he followed Manheim. "But the worms we've found so far were all in the lunchroom. About two hundred altogether."

Manheim saw the man's uniform identified him as 'Wilson.' "What's your name, son?" he asked as they marched through the lobby.

"Larry. Larry Wilson."

"You been with us long, Larry?"

"Just about a month," replied Larry. "Got woke up when you guys stormed into Green Bay. I joined up as soon as I was cleared."

Noticing a sign indicating the direction to the cafeteria to his right, Manheim turned and marched
Manheim heard a bit of an accent in the man's words. Likely from somewhere in eastern Europe. Another transplanted ex-Seeker who had initially been shipped in by Sage of Tides to hunt for the Facility. Without turning to the other man, he asked, "Where are you from, soldier?"

"Czechoslovakia. I'm Jakub Svoboda."

"Thank you for staying and fighting with us, Jakub."

"Hmm," grunted Jakub. "Nothing for me to go back to until all these damn worms are dead."

Up ahead, two broad double set of doors marked the entrance to the cafeteria. Voices echoed from the room beyond. "No," said a man with a gruff sigh to an unheard question, "looks like they did it all pretty much at the same time."

"All the same way?" asked a woman. Her voice sounded younger, and there was a little unsteadiness in her words.

"Yes," replied the older man. "Turned the host's brains to mush. The parasite can live on for two or three minutes longer after the body dies. But there is no sign of any of them being pulled out."

Manheim pushed on the doors open. There was a reluctance in his movement. Part of him did not want to see what was on the other side. But he needed to. He had to. Not just for himself, or for his army. But for all those poor people who had their lives cut short. Who he had failed to save. Someone needed to bear witness.

Inside, the cafeteria was a large atrium with full glass windows. Beyond the glass was a garden full of lush and colorful flowers. The room itself was comprised of more than two dozen oval tables of various sizes. They were spread about, with each table having a cluster of chairs arranged so someone could look out upon the garden when they sat down. And almost all the seats were occupied by men, women, young and the old. Most were dressed in the black uniforms of the Seekers. But a few others were wearing the light blue medical scrubs worn by Healers. All had trails of dried blood coming from their noses or ears. All had vacant dead eyes staring into nothing.

At a far side of ghastly scene stood a man and a woman inspecting some of the bodies. They were both dressed in the combat fatigues of the Army's medical core. When they took sight of Manheim, the doctors quickly straightened and saluted. However, before he could begin to question the two, another group made up of six soldiers poured in from another doorway. It was immediately apparent something was wrong. Several in the unit appeared decidedly ill, looking close to vomiting. The others were in an agitated state of barely suppressed rage.

"Those goddamn sons of bitches..." growled one.

"These buggers are lucky they're already dead," snarled another as he surveyed the dead bodies. "Otherwise I'd be burning them alive..."

The elder doctor's head swung back and forth as tried make sense of the group's angry ranting and nauseated members. "Johnson," he snapped, "What the hell?"

One of the men, looking more than a little green, answered in a near choked whisper, "It's the maternity ward."

"What did you find?" questioned Manheim. But he really did not need to ask. Something like a hard
ball of ice had dropped into his stomach. A sinking feeling, strong enough to weigh his whole body down, told Manheim he already knew the answer.

In their disturbed state, the newly arrived soldiers had not noticed Manheim's presence. When they did, a collective start jolted through them. Their training kicked in, and they all the straightened to attention.

Still looking a little ill, Johnson answered the General's questions. "We were sweeping the upper floors, looking for anyone alive when we came to the maternity wing. We figured it was unlikely anyone was there, had to be sure though. But we were wrong...there were bodies..." He trailed off, the sickly green color growing on his face. One of the other soldiers started muttering more curses under his breath.

"Show me," commanded Manheim.

Johnson and his team lead Manheim along with Wilson and Svoboda back along the direction they had come, deeper into the hospital. The two doctors also quickly followed. They all walked in silence. Entering a dark stairwell, flashing lights were quickly brought out. They climbed up four flights of stairs and exited into an open space with comfortable padded chairs and couches. A waiting room. Then down a hallway, until they reached a large pane glass looking into a dusky dim space. It was hard to make out what was inside. Manheim looked up and saw the word "Nursery" was labeled above the window. The ball of ice in his stomach swelled.

Moving his flashlight up against the glass, Johnson revealed a small wheeled cart with a shallow cradle on top. A bassinet. Inside the little bed, a white blanket covered...something. A tiny form that did not move or react to the light. The beam slowly panned across the nursery and revealed another crib and then another. Twelve in all. Each one had sheets colored a dull grey in the flashlight's illumination covering motionless bodies.

It was very, very quiet in the hallway. Johnson finally spoke. His words coming in a haunted whisper. "We checked...none of them were infected. No parasites."

The younger doctor from the cafeteria peered into the nursery. Her eyes were wide in a hushed horror. "Then how..." she began.

"Looks like it was carbon-monoxide poisoning," answered one of the other men.

She struggled to speak. "But...when the... general population evacuated Madison, wouldn't they have...taken the...babies."

"Why would the parasites do that?" said Svoboda. The man's eyes were dark with a silent rage. "Not a readily useable host. They only care about their own necks. And their precious cryotanks." He practically spat the last word.

"Yes," agreed Manheim with a slow shake of his head. "They did this on purpose. All of it. To show us what they're willing to do."

Angry cries and more curses broke out among the others. A rising fury. Manheim could feel it. He hated what he had to do next. A part of him wanted to scream and wail with fellow soldiers. But undirected rage could become dangerous. The army could lose focus. Becoming nothing more than a raging mob.

"Enough," he growled. "We will make the parasites pay for this atrocity. But first, we attend to the dead." Turning to Johnson, he said, "Those bodies down in the cafeteria are going to start rotting.
Get whoever you need and begin working on a mass grave. And if all possible try to identify who they were originally."

His eyes still on the cribs and the dead infants, Johnson replied with a slow, distracted, "Yes…"

"Soldier!" snapped Manheim.

Johnson shook himself. "Sir! Yes, sir! We'll get on it right away."

Manheim returned to his waiting Humvee by himself. Leaving the gathered soldiers to carry out his orders. The ball of ice was still with him. A heavy weight in his guts. He felt like his blood was beginning to freeze in his veins. Upon reaching it, he found Wyatt standing anxiously beside the vehicle.

"Sir," said Wyatt without a preamble, "Major Durant has been trying to reach you. He's found something."

Another surge of ice in his body. "What?" demanded Manheim.

"I don't know. He's not given me many details other than they've found what looks like the headquarters for the Seekers."

Without hesitation, Manheim climbed into the Humvee. "Take me there,' he ordered Wyatt.

Again they traveled down empty streets of Madison. This time Manheim's gaze was on the road, his eyes focused on nothing. He had miscalculated, and hundreds if not thousands of people were dead. Killed by their controlling parasites. From the start of the war, mass suicide of the Souls had always been a possibility. Speed and surprise had been on humanity's side when taking back a city, yet Manheim was sure there was more to it. The Souls wanted to live. There seemed a reluctance in their race to commit to a final death. But that had also been when they were confident and assured of their control of the Earth. With such an assurance fast slipping away, the Souls were changing how they fought back.

Wyatt brought them to a stop before an irregular oblong shaped building. Its redbrick walls held the remains of a title. Most of the sign had been blasted away from the army's relentless bombardment. Only the letters – 'W,E,S' and 'H,O,O,L' remained. This had been a school once. He could even make out the remains of what had likely been a playground on the left side of the building. Now it was twisted metal and splintered wood. The pit of ice in his body just kept growing.

Stepping out of the Humvee, Manheim found Durant waiting for him. The major took one look at his friend and exclaimed, "Patrick! What ez wrong?"

Durant would find out soon enough. Word would spread of what was found in the hospital. Faster than a wildfire. Manheim shook his head. "You first, what did you find?"

"Dead parasites," replied Durant soberly as they approached the school. "No one alive. But I think someone ez trying to reach you."

"What do you mean?"

"Easier to show you."

The doors to the building had been smashed open. There were indications inside there had been a barricade put in place to keep the humans out. This was likely the Seekers planned last stand. "What
'had changed?' pondered Manheim as Durant lead him down a wide hallway. Several of the classrooms they passed had soldiers inspecting more bodies of dead Seekers. Looking for anything that might reveal who hosts had been when they were human.

They finally came to a small room, not big enough for teaching class. More likely it had once been an office for a teacher. It had been repurposed by the Seekers as a supply room. Food, water, and even ammunition was stack nearly to the ceiling. But what immediately caught Manheim's attention was an open laptop. It's screen giving off a soft glow. With the power to the city gone for over two weeks, this was the first device he had seen that was still operational.

"Ez on a long-term battery," explained Durant. "Ze've have been over zee laptop. No signs ev a trap or bomb."

Manheim stepped up to the laptop. The screen was blank except for one message right in the center – "Press Enter to Connect."

"Connect to what?" he asked.

"Good question," replied Durant. "Zee techs say there ez a satellite receiver in it. Could be speaking to anyone anywhere in the world."

Manheim pressed the Enter key. He along with Durant waited. Once again for another video conference. More than a minute passed, and he was beginning to wonder if there was anyone to answer the call. Perhaps the laptop had been overlooked by the Seekers when they were busy killing themselves. But that was not like the parasites. They were always through. If this laptop was here, it was meant to be found.

At two minutes the laptop's screen flashed twice, and a new window popped up. At first, the image was confusing, showing nothing more than a section of something brown and vaguely lumpy. Then the remote camera moved and refocused. Manheim then recognized the shape as a leather-backed office chair. It was empty, but soon a figure stepped into view and sat down.

Upon seeing her, memories flooded back to Manheim and the ice crept deeper into his body. But they were not his memories. No, they belonged to Sage of Tides. So much of his life had been chewed up by that parasite. It was often difficult for him to remember a time before Sage. He had been a young man. A teacher, in a school not so unlike the one he found himself in now. Years upon years of his body being used. And despite her host body's age, she had been there by Sage's side for much of it.

"Seeker Jade in the Hollows," said Manheim evenly. She was much as he remembered. A small petite body, with straw-colored hair. Wispy fine around her head almost like a halo. With blue-grey eyes and the always present sheen silver in her pupils.

On the laptop's screen, a small smile played on her lips. "It's Patrick, isn't it?"

"Yes."

A small nod. "I'm glad…I mean I'm glad you contacted me. I wasn't sure this would work. Knowing your kind, you could have just kept bombing the city until you obliterated everything."

He did not respond to her attempt at baiting him. Keeping his voice very mild, he asked, "Jade, what do you want?"

"I wanted to explain what's happened in Madison," she said. "I wanted you to understand."
Still keeping his voice calm, he replied. "It's perfectly clear what's happened here. Your forces knew they were beaten and the city was lost. But instead of trying to escape and fight another day, they gave up and killed themselves."

Jade pursed her lips together. An even line across her small face. "Perhaps that is one way to look at it. But this is just a prelude to the future. Any attempts you make to take another city will have the same results. My brethren will kill themselves before you gain anything. You will have nothing but a pyrrhic victory."

Manheim could not keep the rising irritation out of his voice. "What type of strategy is that?" he sneered. "You'll lose everything."

"As will you," replied Jade coldly. "I would think you would see the logic, Patrick. Military tactics were your specialty, was it not? Deny your enemy the resources they need to fight. Every human you reclaim becomes a threat to us. So, I deny you the ability to bring any more of your wretched kind back. Really it's no different if I burn the fields or poison the wells."

The ice in his body began to crack. His hands tightened into fists. Outrage filled his words. "Or killing infants in their cribs!?"

Jade's cool composure broke. "How many of our young did you slaughter when you destroyed the Cryotank storage site in Detroit!? Do you even know!? If I ordered the destruction of twelve newborns, then you ordered the death of a thousand times that number!"

"We are defending ourselves!" he shouted. "Fighting for our right to exist!"

"So are we!" yelled Jade.

The pit of ice in his body dissolved, gone in a rising fire. He stood there, glowering at the image of Jade. The girl glared back at him. But it was not a girl. It was the thing that lived in her body that used her. Used all humans. Bodies to wear and be discarded when not needed. He hated that creature with all his being. Thoughts about plans to take farmland to feed and stabilize the growing human population faded away. This thing in the back of this girl's neck needed to be destroyed.

Patrick Manheim stuck a finger at the laptop's screen and snarled, "See you soon, Jade."

Chapter End Notes

AN: This chapter took a little longer than I planned. I'm kicking off a lot of plot threads that will carry on to the end of the story. As always let me know what you think.

Next Chapter - Bright Moon and Marc go into the heart of darkness, to the Facility itself and discover a terrifying truth.
Handcuffed and shackled, Bright Moon on Fallen Snow listlessly trudged along as the Soul was led down a long winding staircase. One guard on either side, their tight grips on Bright Moon's arms made it clear escape was not possible. The only light came from dim LED bulbs protruding from the cracked cinderblock walls. They provided a dull, washed-out illumination of well-worn cement steps. The hopelessness of the situation weighed Bright Moon down. Made every movement slow and lethargic. It was impossible not despair. Each step was moving deeper into the Facility. Closer to the inevitable fate.

The end of the stairs deposited them into a large tunnel. Concrete walls, reinforced with steel beams crisscrossing back and forth, arched upward until they meet high above. A network of conduits and cables snaked along the upper left side. Off the cabling dangled electric lights, brighter than the sickly yellow glow in the stairwell. They provided just enough visibility to make out the size of this dark passageway. The tunnel was broad enough to easily allow cars and trucks to move through. But there was nothing here, and the only sound came from three men treading on the hard, flat floor.

A feeling of Deja Vu began in Bright Moon, and it was not from the Soul. This place reminded Marc of his old home. The labyrinth of tunnels under Chicago was very similar in construction. The memories of those shadowy dwelling places welled up in the human. It seemed the Facility was also located deep underground.

But the Soul doubted this tunnel was the part of any city's infrastructure. Truthfully, neither Bright Moon nor Marc had any idea where they were. Soon after their capture, they were knocked out with a strong dose of SLEEP. They awoke stripped of all clothing while being poked and prodded in a medical examination by unfriendly hands. Next, they were doused in cold water with harsh stinging soap. Dirt and grim were unceremoniously washed away. A clean blue one-piece uniform was then provided. Given it had been weeks since he had anything like a bath or new clothing, this small mercy from the people of the Facility was surprising and apricated. Then again, Bright Moon was sure that after living out in woods for the better part of two months, Marc's body smelled awful.

After dressing, another blast of SLEEP gas was delivered, and Bright Moon eventually returned to consciousness on a cold floor. A quick glance around revealed they were in a cramped room with no windows or doors, just stairs leading downward. The only other people in the room were two Humans. They were dressed in green-grey combat uniforms, with black stripes across their shoulders. Just like the ones who had ambushed Bright Moon along with the other Seekers.

Bright Moon had asked where they were. The response received was a kick to the stomach from the first guard and a single word from the other.

"Facility."

The answer was expected. Where else would they be going? A little thread of interest buoyed Bright Moon and Marc. They would finally get to see the very mysterious organization. However, it did little to deter their collective dread of reaching their destination.

Presently the tunnel ended at a wall of solid rock. The gray granite stone surface was unevenly
hewed and hacked. Making it impossible to tell if it had been done by hand or machinery and giving no sign if the work was done recently or from long ago. Yet everything here - the stairway, the tunnel, and the wall showed signs of age and neglect.

Which made the massive circular metal door set in the exact center of the wall stand out all that much more. Polished and clean, the door gleamed in the electric lights. It looked very much out of place, seemingly belonging at an entrance to a bank vault, not the underground lair of mad scientists. Gigantic hinges on the left side made it clear the door must be immensely heavy. This was confirmed in a few moments when a deep rumbling started, and the door slowly began to swing open. The muffled reverberation was strong enough to make the ground vibrate under Bright Moon's feet.

'Wow, that door has got to be three feet of solid steel,'
mused Marc as Bright Moon took in the sheer thickness of the doorway into the Facility. 'They don't want anyone getting in.'

'Or out,' grimly added Bright Moon.

Passing through the sizeable threshold put them in an even stranger environment. One of an old-fashion corporate office lobby. Out-of-date furniture, mostly minimalist styled tables and chairs, circled around an impressively sized globe of the Earth. It was colored in simple blues and greens of oceans and land, giving the world map a basic version of the planet. At closer inspection showed the globe to be a partial relief map. Parts of the land bumped unevenly across the orb's surface, accurately recreating various mountain ranges.

There was a distinct style to the model that made Marc's mind think of an early childhood memory. There had been an old map his father had hung in his study. It had formerly belonged to his father, Marc's grandfather. The drawing had been from a time before modern satellite imagery, and all the landmasses were of approximate shape and size. This out of date picture of the Earth added to the feeling everything here was from decades ago.

The rest of the entrance was decorated with fake wooden panels lining the walls. Softly buzzing rectangular shaped fluorescent lights hanging down from above with the ubiquitous white gypsum boards creating a false ceiling. The floor was still the hard-stone ground of the tunnel outside, but it had been smoothed and polished until it became a uniformly flat surface.

Moving past the globe, Bright Moon noticed the entire model rested upon a circular wooden dais. And at the foot of the pedestal were the engraved words – "Welcome to Facility Site 5."

While wondering at the meaning of the inscription, a clanking, grinding noise rose from behind them. Turning, Bright Moon saw the giant door was beginning to close. The Soul only got a brief glimpse of the only potential exit to this strange place before one of the guards gave him a hard shove.

"Face front, worm," barked the guard.

Bright Moon silently obeyed, not wanting to give the two humans further reason to attack him. Marc shifted restlessly in the back of the Soul's head. He did not care for these men. Thoughts of violence percolated through his mind. Kicking and punching their bodies until they lay broken on the ground.

'Stop it,' ordered Bright Moon. 'We can't do that. We're shackled...We couldn't do anything before they rendered us unconscious.'
"I'm not going down without a fight," glowered Marc. He was pushing on the Soul, impatiently trying to test his limbs. Ready to run, ready to fight.

'Please, Marc, stop,' begged Bright Moon. 'I've already seen enough people die today. They will kill you if you fight back, can't you see that? They want me...for whatever reason.'

Marc's anger retreated a bit, but his defiance still burned bright. 'Then we can use that. If you have something they need, then that's leverage. It might not be much, but it's all we've got.'

'I still don't know what the Facility wants,' despaired Bright Moon.

Marc thought on their capture. 'That bastard Lenson said they had questions. You know something they don't.'

'I can't imagine what,' replied Bright Moon.

As they both considered why the Facility had brought them here, they passed by a series of mostly empty rooms. The brief glances Bright Moon managed as they traveled deeper into the underground base revealed spaces that had not been used in years. A layer of dust covered antiquated furniture. The air held a musty, stale odor of decay. Several of the buzzing fluoresce lights overhead hesitantly flickered from overuse.

With so many signs of age and wear, Marc wondered, 'How long have these guys been here? I mean I figured the Facility got started when you guys invaded. But from what I'm seeing, this place has been around for decades.'

'Maybe they learned about us before our invasion,' considered Bright Moon absently. The Soul was running through memories, attempting to figure out what the people of the Facility wanted. There was an edge of an idea beginning to form. But it was still incomplete, and the feeling slipped away as persistent worries about their fate weighed on Bright Moon. A frustrated sigh parted Marc's lips.

"Don't whine," said one of the guards. "We're nearly there."

Bright Moon almost asked the man why they were here but refrained under the assumption such a question would just lead to a further beating. There was not a trace of kindness in either man's eyes. It was also entirely possible neither one knew why Bright Moon had been hunted down. They were just escorting a prisoner.

Turning a corner, they came to a stop in a recess before four wide stainless-steel doors. A thin seam running vertically split each one. A bank of elevators realized Bright Moon. Their surfaces were smooth and polished enough to make a crude a mirror. The Soul managed to make out a distorted reflection of Marc's body in the grey-silver surface. An unkempt beard covered most of his face. With disheveled, dirty hair sprouted off in all directions on his head.

Having gotten a chance to see the toll on his body after months of being on the run, Marc exclaimed, 'Damn, we look like hell.' Bright Moon did not disagree.

There was little else in the alcove. Just a single round button on a metal panel near the first set of doors. It appeared newer than ever-present false wood paneling making up the rest of the walls. The word "Call" was on the button. One of the guards reached out and pressed it. The sound of a click and whirl followed. Then the switch and the metal panel slid upwards to reveal a black tube with a darkened piece of glass in its center.

"Hold still," commanded one of the guards and his hand stiffened around Bright Moon's arm.
A brilliant burst of light came from the cylinder. Bright Moon flinched from the sudden increase in brightness. Then it was gone just as fast as it happened. Like an overpowered flash from a camera held too close to the face. A moment later the tube retracted, and the panel slipped back into its original place.

Bright Moon was still blinking back afterimages, trying to understand what this latest oddity meant when a voice echoed from an unseen source. "Retinal scans complete. Please proceed." A moment later the nearest doors to them slid opened with a minor creak from disuse.

Beyond the elevator's open doors, an empty cab expectantly waited. It was spacious on the inside, with enough room to comfortably fit a dozen people. Bright Moon's escort wasted little time and entered, pulling the helpless Soul along. A panel on the right held the controls for the elevator. It contained only had half a dozen buttons, numbered one through six. The guard nearest pressed the third one, and the doors promptly slid shut. After a moment the cab began moving downward.

When the doors opened again, Bright Moon saw the same archaic wooden panel walls and the smooth stone floor. Yet this level was very different from the empty floor above. It was full of people. Four men dressed in white overcoats passed by, chatting between themselves. A young woman wearing medical scrubs scooted around another two men in overalls working on a section of the wall. They had removed a portion of the fake wood paneling. The open part revealed a messy collection of pipes and conduits running in all direction. The two were apparently carrying out repairs. Leading Bright Moon out of the elevator, the guards passed others coming and going, up and down the wide corridor. Many were dressed in either scrubs or lab coats, but a few wore uniforms like the two guards.

Abruptly a whistling sound came from above, then a long hiss, and finally a voice - "Doctor Burton, you're needed in Biolab Two. Doctor Burton, Biolab Two."

Glancing up, Bright Moon spotted an intercom speaker inlayed into the ceiling. The announcement echoed from further down the hallway. Evidently repeated by other intercoms. Whoever was using it sounded rather bored. This was a typical day for everyone here. Few paid Bright Moon or the guards any direct notice. But there were subtle, silent glances between those they passed.

Judgments? Assessments? Anger? Pity? It was impossible for Bright Moon to tell as the guards continued down the passageway. Everyone hurried off, to where ever they were going. No one spoke a word to any of them.

Their journey twisted through many corridors and hallways. Traveling past doors to offices, conference rooms, and laboratories. Some in use and others sat unused and empty. The fake wooden paneling of the first passageway disappeared as they made their way deeper into the Facility. The walls became smooth stone, giving the impression the corridor had been created when something had sliced through solid rock. At one point they walked by several massive blue colored doors. The sounds of machinery throbbed behind them. Eventually, the guards reached their apparent destination. A single open door at the end of a short hallway.

The room beyond the threshold looked like many of the other offices they had already passed. A square space occupied with a utilitarian designed desk. Three office chairs, one behind the desk and two in front for visitors. The office was different in one regard, it was a great deal messier than the others. Stacks of books and papers lay strewn about the desk. More books were stacked on the floor next to the chair. A laptop sat precariously on a pile of paperwork at the edge of the table. Right next to the computer was a plate with a half-uneaten sandwich. The meal had been there long enough for the grease to congeal into an unsightly glaze of fat on the food.

Bright Moon was lead into the untidy office and was quickly pushed into one of the chairs.
door to office closed. The guards remained standing at attention, taking positions at either side of the Soul. For a good two minutes, no one moved or spoke. The silence stretched on long enough Bright Moon hesitantly stretched and rolled Marc's shoulders. The ongoing stress of their predicament had left the muscles in his back in an uncomfortable kink. The movement caused the manacles around his wrists to jangle noisily. Bright Moon abruptly stopped, worried the sound would lead to a further beating from the guards. But they did nothing, remaining as silent giants towering over the Soul.

Growing curious and trying to make sense of why they had been brought to this disorderly room, Bright Moon looked around the mess. From the titles on the books, they covered a broad range of scientific subjects—Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, Metallurgy, and Physics. Some of the papers contained designs and schematics for some form of machinery. Other documents were a complete mystery. However, what quickly drew Bright Moon's attention was a large world map on the far wall. It was easy to overlook at first, the desk's assorted clutter partially concealed the chart.

Unlike the globe from the entrance to the Facility, this map was modern and offered a detailed outlining of all the various landmasses of the planet. Almost all the land was shaded a uniform red. But here and there across the different continents were little splodges of green. Several small ones splattered across Asia. Two centered in Europe. A single large dot colored like moss sat in the middle of a red Africa. Across the Atlantic Ocean, several more in were in South America. But by in large, the most prominent section of green lay in the middle of North America. A wide emerald crescent stretched around the Great Lakes. The center of the semicircle ran high into Canada. One end was extended along the sides of Lake Erie, almost reaching the city of Cleveland. The other side ran through Minnesota and Wisconsin eventually butted right up against Iowa.

"One guess at what the green parts mean,'

thought Marc.

'Areas controlled by Humans,' answered Bright Moon.

Marc would have whistled in apricated amazement if he had control of his body. Bright Moon could feel a near twitch in the muscles around his mouth. Wanting to form the familiar gesture. Instead, he said, 'The Facility has been busy in the last few months.'

'We were fools to think we could walk out of their territory,' considered Bright Moon. 'The Facility control goes for hundreds of miles.'

From outside the office, a new sound broke into Bright Moon's and Marc's private reverie. Muffled through the door, the voices came of a man and a woman in the middle of some sort of argument.

"I know, I know," said the man defensively. "It's not ideal. I hate that it's come to this."

"It's not…" replied the woman. Part of her answer was lost in words too soft to pick up. It was difficult from their sitting position and the closed door to hear to the entire conversation. The chair Bright Moon sat in could spin to allow for better listening. But combined with the shackles and the ever-present guards, the Soul did not want to risk moving.

"…You've just been so busy lately," came the woman's word, louder than before. "We hardly ever see each other."

The man's voice went soft and hushed. "I'm sorry, Susan. I really am."

"How about tonight?" asked the woman named Susan. "Just the two of us. No meetings, no work."
Bright Moon could almost hear the smile in the man's reply. "You got it, sweetie. Date night, just you and me."

More unintelligible words came from outside the door. Sounds of someone walking away followed by the door opening. Then the man spoke again, this time from the threshold. "Troy, Leo, what are you doing here?" A pause and rising excitement rose in the unseen speaker's voice. "Oh! He's here? Finally!"

Walking into Bright Moon's view came a young man with dark sandy blond hair. He was tall and rail thin. Dressed casually, with jeans and a collared shirt, he seemed very out of place next to the two hulking security guards. His smile was so wide on his narrow face, it made him look like he was squinting at Bright Moon with his dark hazel eyes.

Still smiling, he leaned against the desk and looked the Soul up and down. "Eh, you could use a shave and a haircut."

Bright Moon blinked at the statement, uncertain of how to answer. But the man was already moving, seemingly uninterested in a response. Coming behind the desk, he flopped into the chair. It tipped back from his weight with a loud squeak. He stared upward, rubbing his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"Ugh, hungry," he grunted as he stopped massaging his brow. Leaning forward in his chair he took one look at the half-eaten sandwich and made a face. "That's been here far too long." With a shrug, he dumped the entire plate into a nearby trash bin. Glancing over to one of the guards, he said, "Leo, do you mind getting me something to eat? Whatever the cafeteria is serving."

"Not a problem, sir," replied the guard to the left of Bright Moon. Turning, Leo began to exit the room when the man behind the desk stopped him. "And get the same for my friend here," he said while giving the Soul a playful grin.

"Sir?" questioned Leo with a confused glare at Bright Moon. "We're feeding it?"

Behind the desk, the man's smile dropped a few notches. "Yes, we are," he replied calmly but with a tone carrying a note of authority.

Leo had no difficulties in understanding the clear command. "Yes, sir, right away," he replied stiffly as he spun on his heel and marched away.

'Who the hell is this guy?' wondered Marc as Bright Moon watched the blond-haired man pick up the laptop and press a few keys.

"Well introductions are in order," he said after spending a few minutes studying the computer's screen. "You are Seeker Bright Moon on Fallen Snow."

He flipped the laptop around so Bright Moon could see the screen. It displayed a picture of the Soul's original host – Julia Rickman. She was dressed in the typical black uniform of a Seeker with her crystal blue eyes and her blonde hair done back in a simple ponytail.

Turning the laptop around again, he continued. "We didn't realize for over a month that your original host body died in the initial attack. And that you'd switched to a one Christopher Marcus Walters - also known as Marc Walters." Once more the computer screen was turned, and this time the screen held an image of Marc. In the photo Marc's brown hair was short and spiky, it looked like it had been taken just days before leaving Chicago on the Seekers doomed expedition.

"And I," said the young man behind the desk without any fanfare, "am Alex Winston. The leader
of the Facility."

More than a little surprised by both his age and his overly friendly behavior, Bright Moon blurted out, "You?"

"What?" asked Alex with an amused grin. "Did you think your big bad enemy was a crusty old general or some stuffed-shirt scientist?" He tapped his head with a finger. "Young minds, flexible thinking...It's what it takes to win."

Stunned, Marc whispered, 'Alex is no older than me. He's the one behind everything the Facility has done?'

'I don't know;' whispered back Bright Moon. 'Maybe this is all some sort of a trick. He's being awfully friendly for someone who's repeatedly tried to kill us.'

Leaning back in his chair, Alex put his hands behind his head and then proceeded to put his feet up on his messy desk. Gazing up at the ceiling, his mouth cracked open in a wide yawn. "This has been a long day for me," he said with a tired sigh.

His eyes lowered to refocus on Bright Moon. "You have also had a very trying time. At least you got some sleep after we captured you. That little merry band of Seekers you were hiding with really did run us all over the place. Had to bring in outside help from the army. And that ended...poorly."

Remembering the heartless murder of the soldier named Joan over her witnessing the execution of the other Seekers, Bright Moon felt a rise of incensed aggravation over the bloodshed. "Your man Lenson killed one of your own kind. For no reason at all."

Alex arched an eyebrow. "And this bothers you? A human killing another?"

"It doesn't trouble you? It's barbaric!" snapped Bright Moon.

"This war is a brutal, messy, miserable job," replied Alex patiently. "And I like none of it. Nevertheless, I'm tasked with winning it. Unfortunately, that means I must sometimes sacrifice people." He pulled his legs off the desk and sat up straight. "But you didn't answer my question. Why is the death of one Human a problem for you? Why do you care?"

"It was senseless, there was no reason to kill her."

Alex shook his head. "I disagree, she was going to report the actions of my security chief. That could have caused a considerable amount of friction between the Facility and larger Resistance Army. I can't risk that. Regrettably, Joan Naylor had to die."

Both Bright Moon and Marc felt a rising frustration with Alex. His callousness was infuriating. Their words and emotions mixed together. "Covering up crimes? Dishonesty? Deceit? These are your explanations? To kill anyone who gets in your way?"

"You keep avoiding my actual question," said Alex with a roll of his eyes. "Let me make this simpler, I'll make it multiple choice." Staring intently at Bright Moon, he began to count off on his fingers. "One, because it's morally wrong to commit murder. Two, you are still sympathetic towards Humans. Or three, guilt."

"You see," continued Alex, "I know a good deal about you, Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. The Seeker who turned against her own kind to protect humans. Who developed a romantic attachment to Marc Walters. Now your current host." He paused, and reflected, "That relationship didn't seem to work out well for Marc, did it?"
"Anyway," said Alex without giving Bright Moon a chance to respond. "If it's the first choice, that's laudable. But keep in mind Joan quickly discarded Amber Rains, the Seeker who had been controlling her body. She would have had no problem getting rid of your little worm body. If despite the war and losses your kind have suffered, you are still supportive of us angry humans, that's also a very admirable answer. On the other hand, if it's the third choice - you feel guilty because we were hunting for you, and if you had not been hiding or had given yourself up, none of those deaths would have happened."

Bright Moon's mouth fell open in surprise, with no ready answer for Alex. For a long moment, the two just stared at each other. Finally, Alex who had securitized the Soul like a hawk sizing up a field mouse, said, "I just wanted to understand if your objection came because you wanted to cling to the idea you have the moral high ground or if it's out of personal remorse because it's all your fault."

The sound of door opening and Leo returning cut off any type of response from Bright Moon. The guard carried two trays, each one with a plate full of food and utensils. Something brown with thick noodles. Steam wafted off both dishes filling the room with a spicy aroma. Leo placed one before Alex on his desk, careful to avoid the scattering of books and papers. The other he dropped on Bright Moon's lap. Some of the meal splatter about as the Soul tried to catch the tray. It was not easy with restraints around his wrists, and some of the food messily spilled on Bright Moon's jumpsuit.

"Take those things of him," commanded Alex as he saw the Soul struggle with the tray and the shackles. "He doesn't need them."

Troy, the other guard, gave Alex a sidelong look. "You sure about that?"

"Yes," insisted Alex with a sigh. "And after that, you two can step outside."

Leo and Troy exchanged an indifferent shrug and then leaned in and began to remove the cuffs from both Bright Moon's arms and legs. After the chains were removed, they crossed to the office's doorway. Before closing the door, Leo said pointedly, "We'll be right outside, sir."

Alex watched them go. When the door had shut, he shook his head sadly. "They don't care for you too much, Bright Moon. Or your host body." Seeing the confused expression on the Soul's face, Alex elaborated, "Kane Adams - he was their commanding officer. They took his loss rather personally."

Bright Moon just stared down at the tray of food resting on his lap, uncertain of what to do or say. Everything here defied the Soul's expectations or understanding of the Facility. Worrying concerns of interrogations or torture had been replaced with arguments over ethics and a meal.

"Eat! No reason we can't be civil enough to share a meal," came Alex's voice as Bright Moon continued to gaze at the steaming pile of food. It was some sort of stir-fry. Vegetables along with noodles were mixed in a brown sweat and spicy sauce. For someone who had not had a decent meal in weeks, it smelled absolutely fantastic. Yet, Bright Moon resisted, not wanting to touch the offered food. It felt too much like giving in to Alex.

'Oh, come off it. I can feel you practically drooling,' said Marc. 'We need this. No idea when we might get a chance to eat this well.'

Reluctantly Bright Moon picked up a fork and poked at a knot of noodles, mushrooms, and carrots. Taking a bite, the Soul nearly moaned as the rich flavor touched his tongue. The food tasted even better than it smelled. Soon Bright Moon was shoving the sautéed vegetables in as fast as Marc's
"We grow all of it right here," said Alex. He had already finished his meal and had gotten up from his chair. Standing before Bright Moon, he again leaned against his desk. His whole posture comfortably at ease. "We're pretty self-sufficient," he added with a note of pride. "Got a whole hydroponics farm and a big quarry filled with mushrooms."

"This site was originally established during the Cold War," continued Alex as he gave a short wave of his hand signifying the entire Facility. "You know, one of those long-term bunkers if they ever dropped the big one. This whole place was a black project. The type the US government loved to fund. Way off the books. Made it easier to hide its existence from your kind when you took over."

Putting the fork down, Bright Moon asked, "What do you want with me? I don't think you've gone through all this effort to feed me and tell me about the history of your underground base."

Alex smiled. "Right to the point. No dithering around. I like that about you, Bright Moon." He rubbed his hands together. "Well," he said, "we've got some questions, and you're the only Soul I've been able to track down who might be able to answer them. And even if you don't know the answers, you may be able to point me in the right direction to someone who does."

Behind Bright Moon, the door opened again, and someone shuffled through. Alex did not pay any attention to whoever had entered. His gaze remained fixed on the Soul.

Bright Moon let out a lamented breath, tired of waiting to find out what was so important to Alex and the Facility. "Then why don't you just ask?"

Whoever had entered the room made slow steps to come up behind Bright Moon. The chair the Soul sat in rocked a bit as an unseen hand began to slowly turn it around.

"You see..." said Alex as his smile dropped away. "...I'm not going to be the one asking the questions."

Slowly the chair spun halfway around to face the newcomer. And Bright Moon stared up into the eyes of a nightmare. It towered over the Soul with a lanky, slender body. From knobby shoulders came two long bony arms, turning and stretching in a most inhuman way. At the end of the arms, small round hands with four thick fingers, reach out towards him. They curled and uncurled in a slithering fluid motion. The tip of one glanced along Bright Moon's cheek. Its touch was ice cold. And all of it, the creature's entire body, was the color of darkened deathly gray ash.

It leaned down, hunching forward. Graceful, almost serpentine-like, until its head was nearly level with Bright Moon's face. Wide oval yellow-red eyes stared out of a shriveled skull. There was no nose, just a vertical slit between the large eyes. There was nothing so much like ears on either side of the creature's head, just a thickening of wrinkled, scaly skin. The sight of black onyx teeth could be seen behind the lipless mouth which puckered opened and closed several times.

Frozen in complete shocked astonishment, Bright Moon felt as if Marc's body had been turned into stone. For long seconds, both aliens stared at each other. Neither one moving. Finally, Alex, unseen off to one side said softly, "As I said before, introductions are in order. Seeker Bright Moon on Fallen Snow, meet Paz, one of the last living Vultures."

From Paz's mouth came a series of hoots and clicks. A moment later a voice emerged from the creature's head. Clear and precise English, albeit wholly synthesized and robotic. "How did you know I was here?"
The question was so mundane and effortlessly asked, Bright Moon could only wordless gape at the Vulture. The Soul's mind so utterly at a loss that any type of answer would be impossible. But more translated questions quickly came from Paz - "You were informed of our existence by a parasite named Wanderer. You then attempted to inform the other parasites. How did Wanderer gain this information? What Human did she also tell? How many Humans did you tell of my existence?"

Some part of Bright Moon's mind caught on and realized the translated voice was not coming directly from the Vulture, but a small, round device near the top of the wrinkled head. A translator of some sort. More questions and demands echoed from the circular disk. All of Paz's questioning coming in the same artificial and emotionless voice.

Then without warning, one of the Paz's hands with the thick curling fingers reached out and grabbed Bright Moon by the throat with a fearsome grip. The creature reared back, once again towering over the Soul. With little apparent effort, he yanked Bright Moon out the chair. At the same time the four wings, black and terrible, billowed out from the creature's back.

A hiss came from the Vulture in guttural English, "Sssspreek wormmmm… I grooow immmpatient…"

Paz's words were filled with loathing and rage. His enormous yellow-red eyes bored into Bright Moon. From near Marc's right ear, Alex's voice came in a pleading whisper. "I would tell him. He's not in the best of moods." However, caught in the Vulture's iron grip, Bright Moon could only manage a few faint sputters as the Soul was driven to the point of utter terror.

Locked in the back of his own mind, Marc was helpless as an all-consuming fear choked Bright Moon. He was buffeted by a stream of the Soul's memories. Old ones, from many mothers ago. He was pulled down by them. They swallowed him whole as he sunk into darkness.

Marc then saw through eyes that were not human. The original hosts for the Soul on their homeworld - The Origin. He saw the Vultures arriving in a massive colony ship. Travelers to this peaceful planet. They brought strange and dreadful machines that tore at the ground, siphoned away the water, changed the colorful air. The Souls did not understand these new creatures. What did they want? Why did they make such chaos? In friendship they came in their host bodies and tried to speak with these mysterious visitors, to find a way to live peacefully together.

But it was not to be. The Vultures did not want peace. At first, the Souls were driven away. Pushed back from the newcomer's colony. In time that changed. The Vulture began to hunt for the Soul's host race. It became a sport for them, running the gentle creatures down. Slashing and stabbing their hosts without mercy. Then things grew even worse for the Souls. The Vultures began to specifically collect the Souls themselves. Ripping their fragile bodies from their hosts. They found the small silver beings to be a taste treat, a delicacy.

In horror, Marc saw in Bright Moon's memories hundreds of the Souls' tiny silvery ribbon bodies sliced open, to be roasted alive on firepits. The thousand thin tentacles shriveling as they burned. The silver blood dripping from the Vultures' lipless mouths. And at that moment Marc finally understood why the Souls’ had granted the name to this race.

Vulture.

Carrion Eater.

Devourer of the Dead.
At the same time, caught in Paz's grip, Bright Moon let out a wheezed gasp, "You…want…to…know…"

"Telllll Meee!" screeched the Vulture and tightened his grip on Bright Moon.

Fear spiked through the Soul. The terror of the moment paralyzing him as Paz's multijointed fingers began to cut off oxygen. But even as Bright Moon flailed helplessly, an echoing banging started in the back of the Soul's head. From the darkest depths of Marc's mind, boiling anger began to build.

'get off me…'

It came again.

'Get Off Me…'

Paz shoved Bright Moon back into the chair, yet his hold did not slacken on the Soul. Leaning in, the Vulture's words returned to their artificial translation. "I need to know everyone you told of my existence. Everyone Wanderer would have told. Tell me, and I will make your death quick and painless. Resist me, and I will make you suffer."

'GET OFF ME…GET OFF ME…'

Despite the peril of the Vulture's grasp around his throat and threatening words, the relentless pounding in the back of Soul's mind was drowning out everything. The merest thought an impossibility.

'GET OFF ME! GET OFF ME! GET OFF ME!'

And then in one perfect moment of righteous fury, Marc surged forward and shoved Bright Moon aside. Reclaiming control of his body from the Soul. As Paz bent over him, the Vulture's hand still around his throat, Marc made his first movement on his own in over three months. An uncoordinated kick of his foot against the alien monstrosity. It did little to stop the Vulture, but it did cause the towering creature to momentarily readjusts his footing. Slacken his hold on the human for just a second.

That was the opening Marc needed.

With both arms, he thrust off the chair, shoving himself into Pazuzu's body. At the same time, he let out a roar of unrestrained rage and finally gave voice to his mental mantra - "GET OFF ME!"

Marc's body slammed into the Vulture, driving the creature back. Paz gave a surprised squawk of alarm as his long arms pinwheeled back, desperately trying to right himself. Marc made another kick at the alien, this time far more coordinated. It connected with the Vulture's stubby short legs. The alien toppled backward with a noisy crash.

"Paz!" came the worried cry from Alex.

Spinning toward the other man, Marc saw the look of complete astonishment on Alex's face as their eyes locked. Then Marc punched that face as hard as he could. Alex tumbled into his desk and went down with another loud thump.

The door the office slammed open, Leo and Troy in the doorway. The eyes sweeping over the fallen forms of the Vulture and their leader. Marc was running on pure instinct and adrenaline. He seized the back of the chair he had just been sitting in and flung it at Leo with the last of his strength. The guard saw the piece of furniture flying at him but did not have time to get out of the
way before it smashed into his head. He stumbled back, bleeding and dazed. Crashing into Troy, causing both men to fall back from the doorway.

And then like a flip of a switch, Bright Moon was back in control. Stunned and shaking with sweat pouring down his face, the Soul stood feebly amid the unfolding chaos. Alex was sprawled across the floor, unmoving. Paz was thrashing about, his wings and bony arms flailing as he tried to stand up. The two guards were sitting dazed in the hallway outside.

Terrified. Astonished. Completely at a loss of what to do. Bright Moon whispered, 'Marc…'

He had poured everything he had into those few seconds while he retained control of his body. In those moments of utter violence, Marc had freed them. Now completely exhausted, he sank back down. 'Run you fool…' he gasped out as faded into the blackness in the back of their shared mind.

Bright Moon bolted out of the office and ran as fast as his shaking legs would allow.

"This won't do," said Jennifer Dobson aloud. Pausing she closed her eyes for a brief second. Taking a moment to focus. She was beginning to realize she was talking to herself more and more.

She looked down at the report she was preparing. The records had been carefully edited. She had put small gaps in the data. Hoping Paz and the other Vultures would not see through her deception. Not see her betrayal. But it was not going to work. They knew more than they let on. They were always at least one step ahead. They would know right away she was lying.

"No," she said. The Vultures were not all-knowing. Something had gone wrong with their wonderous CURE drug. Unexpected results and apparently they did not know how to fix the problem. Owen's condition was proof. "They needed me to figure it out."

Again she was talking to herself. Not a good sign.

Jennifer got up from her desk and stretched. Letting tired muscles in her back and neck flex and relaxed. Her lab coat had rumpled up as she had sat in her chair these last few hours. She began to work the wrinkles in it out as she walked around her lab. Passing sterile examination tables, banks of microscopes, and a row of centrifuges. Pausing before her preservation tanks and specimen jars, she then looped back and strolled again through her room. What she needed was a plan. The others would not find out about what she had done with Owen for another two days. Three if she was fortunate. After that, there would be no lying her way out of what she had done. Pacing about her laboratory, she continued to ponder just what she would do. But the truth was the answer was oblivious. She needed to escape.

"And go where?" she asked herself.

General Manheim and his army was the logical choice. But also the obvious one. Alex and Neil would almost immediately figure out her plan. She needed to throw them off or have some sort of a backup strategy.

As Jennifer walked backed to her desk, lost in thought, the emergency alarm blared into life. The high pitch sequel made her jump. It rang from multiple speakers. Echoing throughout the entire level. Her heart was in her throat. Wild panic ran through her limbs. They knew. They were coming for her. If she was lucky, they kill her right away. If she were not, the Vultures would use her for one of their 'experiments.'
She calmed herself. That was not how it worked. If she had been discovered, it would be handled quietly by Neil and his security team. With no witnesses. Not with attention-getting and noisy alarms. This was confirmed a moment later when the shrill ring of the alert ended, and an urgent message was broadcasted to everyone in the Facility.

"Escaped prisoner on level three. Last seen in sector two. Recapture the highest priority. Maximum security protocols initiated. All non-essential personnel to lock down positions."

The message repeated twice more, and Jennifer felt a rising sense of confusion. It could not be Owen. He was in a deep unconscious state on level five. Unless someone knew what to look for, he would give all the appearances of a dead body. So, who was it?

Despite the orders for a lockdown, Jennifer went to the door leading to the outside hallway and opened it a crack. Peering around the empty corridor, she saw no one. She listened, but beyond the faint noise of the air recyclers, there was nothing. She was almost ready to close the door when her ears picked up a sound. Feet rapidly smacking against the hard floor. Quick breathy gasps. Someone running for their life.

Opening the door wider, Jennifer took a cautious step into the hallway. It was a long straight passageway. The entrance to her lab the only door in this section. She still saw no one, but the sound of whoever it was growing louder. She waited and was rewarded a moment later when a tall figure came rushing around the far corner.

He was dressed in the usual blue jumpsuit of a prisoner. His long coffee colored unkept hair straggled in all directions as his head pivoted back and forth. Anxiously looking for some sort of escape as he jogged down the corridor. As he closed on Jennifer, she could see there was a gauntness to his face where it was not covered by a ratty beard. This disheveled man did not look in the best of conditions.

Then his restless eyes focused on her, and he drew to a halting stop. He was close enough now that Jennifer could see the faint reflective rings of silver in his brown eyes.

They stood gaping at each other for what seemed like hours. His chest rapidly rising and falling as he sucked in air. She blinking in stunned surprise. Jennifer half expected him to spin around bolt down the hallway. But he didn't.

"Please…" he gasped out, "get me out…of here…"

Echoing the question she had asked herself only minutes before, she said, "And go where?"

"Anywhere…Far away from here…" said the parasite distractedly. His eyes roamed around ceaselessly, desperate for an escape. They landed on the open door to her laboratory. Seizing on what must seem like a possible place to hide, he rushed past her and went inside. Not the smartest of moves.

Jennifer followed and found the parasite had only taken a few steps inside before coming to a stop. His ever moving gaze swung around the room. Taking in everything here. The dozens of specimen jars, each one containing dismembered parasites. Preservations tanks filled with samples of tiny Soul organs. One the centrifuges still spun with vials of silver blood. Pictures and graphs of the parasite's internal anatomy laid plastered on the far wall. All her work for the last ten years. His eyes lost their desperate, panicked plastered on the far wall. Now they filled with unrelenting horror.

"What…is…this…place?" he managed to sputter out as he turned slowly around to face her.
"My lab," she said evenly.

Going pale, he looked very close to vomiting. "You're a monster!"

She cocked her head to one side. "Yes, I suppose I am."

He began backing away from her as though she was a diseased leper. Finally putting together who this parasite must be, she closed the distance to the terrified Soul. "You're the one Alex has been looking for."

Still retreating, the parasite gasped out, "Stay away."

Jennifer stopped. Not so much from the Soul's demand, but because a half-formed idea began to come together in her mind. It was more than a little insane. But desperate times called for desperate measures. "Are there really others of your kind that sided with us Humans? Not out of guilt or some self-indulgent form of pity, but truly care for us?"

Her question surprised the parasite. He weakly shook his head, as if he was trying to fight off a wave of nausea. "There are if you haven't killed them all."

"I suppose it will have to do," said Jennifer as she pulled her pistol from its concealed holster hidden by her lab coat. Mostly because of recent events, she had taken to carrying the gun everywhere she went. Who knew when she might need. Like now.

The parasite's eyes went wide when he saw her weapon, and he froze in sudden surprise. That worked well for her because her hands unsteadily shook. It had been a long time since Jennifer had last fired a gun. And she needed to be accurate.

"Don't..." began the Soul and she pulled the trigger.

The bang of her gun resonated about her lab like a stab of thunder. The parasite wordlessly crumpled to the ground. She let out a shuddering breath and put the pistol back in its holster. The sound of the gunshot would draw the others. She had only a few scants seconds to put her plan into motion.

Quickly approaching the fallen figure, Jennifer bent down to examine her latest work. She had done well. The bullet had entered near the center of man's abdomen, close to where the celiac artery ran around the stomach. Dark blood pooled around the wound and the parasite weakly groaned.

Working fast, Jennifer retrieved a medical scalpel from a nearby surgery storage container and pressed her hand again the ragged hole in the man stomach. More blood sprang from the gaping injury. A deep moan of pain came from his lips as his eyes fluttered.

There was no time for anesthetics. "I'm sorry," Jennifer whispered, "But this is going to hurt like hell, but it will save your life." With that, she pushed the sharp edge of the scalpel into the ruptured wound and began her work. The parasite let out a shriek of agony and the promptly passed out from the pain.

She was just finishing when Neil Lenson and his security team burst into her lab. Guns drawn, they rushed in, swarming around the room. "He's down," she shouted as they circled around her, ready for a confrontation that was not going to happen. The parasite lay on the floor, bloodied and unconscious.

Neil stood over her as she held the hand over the bleeding hole in the man's gut. With a confused
frown, he asked, "What the hell happened here?"

Standing up slowly, she rubbed her aching calves. Operating from the floor on the parasite had been murder on her back and legs. She really was getting too old for this type of work. "I know we were in lockdown, but I heard it outside my lab. I opened the door, and it rushed in. I think it was looking for a place to hide."

"And you shot it?" asked Neil as he studied the unmoving man on the ground.

She nodded.

"Good work, Jen," said Neil with a smile that if she had not known him better, she would have considered it a friendly grin.

"I've already removed the bullet, but I'll need to do some more work, or it will bleed out."

"I wouldn't bother," said Neil with a huff. "We'll just pull the bugger out and give it to the Vultures." He shook his head with an angry sigh. "Alex had gotten it in his head to play some stupid game with this worm."

"It may have been a stupid game," said a new voice with biting anger. "But I learned something very important."

Both Neil and Jennifer turned to find Alex standing in the doorway. Neil flinched. Alex's face was red and swollen, he appeared well on his way to having a huge black eye. Striding into the room, Alex came to stand over the unconscious Soul. Scowling down at the unmoving man, he asked, "Is he going to live?"

"Yes," answered Jennifer, "If I work quickly."

"Well do it," snapped Alex. "I want to talk to him. I want to talk to both of them."

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Awareness returned slowly to Bright Moon, the body's senses fitfully retuning to a semblance of order. Light, a ruddy yellow color streamed from above to his blurry eyes. Blinking a few times, a constant tap…tap noise reached his ears. Water dripping from somewhere close. His mouth felt like it was full of cotton. He coughed once, a dry bark of air making its way out of his throat. That set off a dull aching of pain in his midsection.

Time passed, and more impressions made their way to the Soul. Bright Moon was laying down on something soft. Upon turning his head, the Soul saw a thin mattress underneath him. The makeshift bed lay on a dull grey steel floor. Trying to set up brought a renewed jolt of discomfort from his abdominal area and sickening lurch of vertigo.

Closing his eyes, the memories came back. The gray-haired doctor. She had shot him. Right in the stomach. Remembering the white-hot lance of pain. Bright Moon's hand went immediately to his abdomen. Exploring for the wound. But there was none. Not even a trace of a scar on Marc's body.

Marc…

A weak cry came from Bright Moon. The Soul could not feel his presence. In taking back his body, he had seemingly drained everything of himself. His absence sent a panicked wave of fear through
Bright Moon.

'Marc! Marc! Please come back! I can't lose you again!'

At first, there was nothing. But then just the thinnest of slivers of through reached the Soul.

'Ahhh...damn...'

Bright Moon zeroed on the faint trickle. 'Marc...Please...Are you alright?'

'Feels...like I got...hit by a bus...'

Despite everything, a slight laugh escaped the Soul. 'So do I.'

'Ooh wow...' came back Marc's response. It was stronger now. Firmer in the back of the Soul's mind. 'I thought we were both a goner.'

'Yes,' thought Bright Moon as relief flood through their shared mind. 'I thought so too. I'm so glad you're still with me.'

They pulled together, a mutual entwining of their consciousnesses. Holding on to each other. Trying to take comfort in the fact they were both still alive. For a long time, they remained in this tight embrace. Holding on to what little they had.

'Where are we?' finally asked Marc.

'I don't know. I only woke up a little while ago. I don't know how long we were out.'

Opening his eyes again, Bright Moon peered around. They were in a small rectangular room. The steel floor seemingly blended smoothly into the walls. The sides then merged above at the top. Forming a featureless ceiling that was only broken up by a single square light situated behind a shiny metal cage. One uninterrupted and closed off space.

Remembering the pain and the dizziness at the previous attempt at moving, the Soul gradually brought Marc's body to a sitting position to get a better look around. There was not much else in the room. A toilet and a sink were squeezed into one corner of the room. The little basin was the source of the sound of dripping water. The mattress they laid upon was the only thing else in this place. Slowly turning around revealed no doors or windows in this apparent jail cell.

Even this languid pace of moving around produced a dull ache throbbing in the middle of Marc's body. Bright Moon once again examined the spot where they had been shot. Confirming the lack of apparent injury. 'It hurts, but there is no wound.'

'They healed us,' said Marc. 'But didn't bother with pain medication.'

'Cruel,' replied Bright Moon. Thoughts of being shot by the grey-haired doctor and her disturbing laboratory made the Soul shudder. 'Everything the Facility is...It's beyond appalling. There are no words.'

'I know. This is not good,' agreed Marc. 'That Paz...'

'The Vultures are here. Now. Allied with the Facility. Everything we feared is true.'

Marc pulled out of their mental embrace and pondered, 'And that's what they wanted you for? Because we knew about them?"
'It must be. That Vulture was screaming at me to tell him how Wanderer knew of their existence.'

In their shared mind it was easy for both Marc and Bright Moon to touch each other thoughts. Feelings and emotions washed back and forth between the two with ease. Marc slid though Bright Moon's memories over the past few months. Trying to make sense out of everything that had happened today. He came away surprised.

'Before, you didn't really believe it about the Vultures,' said Marc. 'Even when we spoke to Sage of Tides or when you told the Seekers at Iron Mountain. Part of you didn't think it was possible.'

Sighing, Bright Moon responded. 'Think of it as if I told you there was a living dinosaur running around in Grant Park back home. You might be willing to believe me, but some bit of you wouldn't think it was real. It couldn't be real. Dinosaurs are dead and gone. You know this as a fact. It's the same for Vultures.' Thinking back over the previous few months, the Soul added, 'Most of my people didn't want to listen to me when I spoke about what Wanderer found. They thought either she or I was crazy.'

'Well, score one for the insane impossibility,' replied Marc dryly. 'The Vultures are very much alive and right here among your worst enemy.' Pausing in thought, he added, 'Still doesn't explain why they wanted you so badly.'

'The Vultures don't want anyone to know of their existence on Earth.'

'But your own people don't believe it's possible. No one listened to you,' pointed out Marc.

Bright Moon retreated away from their shared mental space. The Soul's thoughts probing through all the possibilities. After a few long minutes, a spark of an idea lit up Bright Moon's mind. 'Perhaps its like you said in the forest. This is not about us Souls, but about you Humans.'

'How so?' asked Marc.

'Paz demanded to know which Humans had been told by Wanderer or me. But not which Souls. Why the distinction? They seem to care more about your people knowing than we Souls. They must know Wanderer and I are allied with you and the other Humans.'

A thought suddenly occurred to Marc. 'Back in the woods, Joan said she remembered her time as Amber Rains. That Amber Rains' memories were part of the reason why she didn't trust the Facility. So a Human brought back by this CURE stuff knows everything the Soul controlling them knew.'

'Which means everyone we spoke to at the Bunker and I tried telling at Iron Mountain could potentially reveal the information if they get exposed to the Facility's CURE drug...,' Bright Moon abruptly stopped as the Soul made a horrifying realization. 'That's why Lenson killed Sky Roost and Second Sunrise. The Facility must have worried I talked to them, told them about Wanderer's discovery. He said they couldn't risk their host bodies being recovered. I doomed them...'

Marc pushed back. 'Hey now, don't blame yourself. This is not on you. This is the Vultures doing. I think you're right though. They don't want any Humans to know about them. Hell, maybe that's part of the reason why Lenson killed Joan. No one gets to question the Facility or their scary allies.'

Both Bright Moon and Marc grew silent as they contemplated what they had learned. After a few quiet minutes, Bright Moon spoke up. 'Paz asked about how Wanderer knew of their existence. That means they don't know about Mia.'
Marc concurred. "Yeah. Mia is the one who escaped from here. Its the big piece of the puzzle Alex and Paz don't have. And it seems to me that has got them worried.'

Interrupting their mental conversation, a vibration came through the steel floor. A few faint clunking noises could be heard. Bright Moon tensed, uncertain what was happening. Then a rumble came from the far side of the cell. The wall making up the side of the tiny room slid away with an audible thud. Revealing a dimly lit corridor beyond the entranceway. And in this newly open passageway, one single figure stood silhouetted in the pale-yellow light.

'Speak of the devil,' said Marc as Alex stepped into the jail cell. He stopped only a few feet in and stood before them, looking down at them a faint frown. Without any type of single on his part, the door to the cell rumbled to a close behind him. Alex then leaned back against the newly closed wall and gradually slid down, letting his legs fold underneath him. When he was seated on the floor, he ran a hand through his thick blond hair. He looked tired, as the steady weight of exhaustion weighted upon his shoulders as he watched Bright Moon.

"Look," Alex said finally, "I just wanted you to understand. It's not…personal." Sighing, he added, "I mean, I know I've hurt you. And I've hurt people you care about. But I wanted you to understand it wasn't done maliciously."

He paused and looked away, keeping his face hidden. Bright Moon caught a fleeting look of shame as he bowed his head "Those I've had hurt…or killed. I'm not remotely proud of it." Letting out another sigh, Alex turned back to focus on Bright Moon. "But for whatever it's worth, I wanted to say I'm sorry."

A silence fell in the tiny cell as the two stared each other down. The weariness in Alex's eyes seemed to only grow as the seconds of stillness turned to minutes. Bright Moon remained still, not saying anything. Uncertain of how to respond to the other man's apology. Marc pushed forward in their shared mind and whispered to Bright Moon 'Maybe we don't have this completely right. Maybe Alex and the others were forced by the Vultures into starting the war."

'Perhaps,' replied the Soul. It was a possibility, the humans of the Facility could be pawns in the Vultures' plans. Attempting to explore Alex's commitment to the war, Bright Moon took a deep breath and tried to push away roiling nausea swaying through Marc's body and tried to speak. His first words came out in a dry cough. Clearing his throat, Bright Moon started again, "You felt you had no choice?"

Alex looked thoughtful, apparently considering the question. "You always have a choice," he said quietly after a few seconds. "I made mine, and I will live by it."

Still trying to reach Alex, Bright Moon offered shakily, "You can't trust them…This Paz…The Vultures…They're using you…to get their revenge…"

"Of course, they're using us for their revenge," scoffed Alex with a wave of his hand. "And we're using them to win our planet back. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement."

"And when you are done…and Earth is yours again? What do you think they'll want next?"

Without hesitation, Alex replied, "For us to keep fighting until your kind are all dead. On every world, including your Origin."

Exasperated, Bright Moon rasped, "You offer me an apology for the deaths you've caused, and yet you want the complete genocide of my people!"
With a firm shake of his head, Alex let out a tight laugh. "I wasn't apologizing to you, Bright Moon on Fallen Snow. I was apologizing to your host…Marc Walters."

An icy cold shudder of shook went through Bright Moon as the Soul gaped at the other man. 'He knows!' exclaimed Marc in mutual surprise. Their joint alarm blended with the ache in Marc's stomach leaving Bright Moon wheezing in a near groan.

"Get off me!" said Alex in a mock yell and a widening smile started on his face. "Marc took over back at my office, didn't he? I saw the expression on your face, Bright Moon, when his control faded. That look of stunned amazement."

"It's not…" began Bright Moon.

"Don't lie to me."

Alex spoke these words quietly, but there was an edge in his voice. He stretched out his legs and rolled his back against the cell wall as he made himself comfortable. Then he clasped his hand together and his hazel eyes locked on Bright Moon's. The weariness he had cast about himself seemingly ebbed away as settled back onto the floor.

"I have to admit I had my suspicions," said Alex with a minor shrug of his shoulders. "If Marc was willing let himself be used as your host, might he linger on? We know it's a possibility. But I'll say I did not see his little outburst coming." He leaned forward just a bit, his eyes curious. "Can Marc do it again? Take control?"

Seconds ticked by as Bright Moon debated how to answer. Alex was proving himself to be exceptionally observant and all too quick to work out someone's secrets. How long would it take before he ferreted out other truths from them? Like Mia. Worries began to mount. Trying to take a steadying breath, Bright Moon eventually answered with the truth, "No. Marc was…angry. Furious. Even he didn't realize…he could do it until it was…over."

"Hmm," mused Alex. Giving no indication whether he believed them or not. "But right now, he can hear me?"

"Yes," admitted Bright Moon.

With a nod of his head, Alex said, "Well, Marc, you've certainly created a mess for me. Paz is livid, and my security chief is all over me for breaking protocols." Alex shook his head. "I mean, normally this is not how we'd handle things. We'd just dose a Soul with a bit CURE, and in a few hours, we'd have a normal, grateful human who would tell me anything I wanted to know. But you Bright Moon have the one host where that wouldn't work. Marc cares about you…I dare say I think he loves you, as crazy as that sounds. He would actively resist me. Now, what am I supposed to do?"

'Glad I could screw things up, asshole,' thought Marc darkly.

'That's not helping us,' complained Bright Moon.

Marc was unwilling to bend. 'I'll take what victories we can get.'

"Having a little internal chat, are we?" questioned Alex. He was leaning forward, his eyes ever watchful as he gazed at Bright Moon.

'He's not letting anything past him,' muttered Marc.
"Well, you two, listen to me," said Alex firmly. "Paz wants to pull you, Bright Moon, out of Marc. Then he wants to make Marc watch as he rips Bright Moon apart, cell by cell. That would be hellish agony for a Soul. And would take a very long time to die. He'd only stop when Marc told him everything."

The ever-present shaky weakness in his injured abdomen roiled as a panicked fear took both Marc and Bright Moon. The all too recent memories from the gray-haired doctor's laboratory of dissected and dismembered Souls joined in as well. Acidic bile rose up in the back of Bright Moon's throat at Alex's threat, and the Soul began to cough and gag.

"Calm down," instructed Alex as he saw the ghastly look of frightened terror on Bright Moon's face. "I've talked him out of it for now. Honestly, I think all that would accomplish is for Marc to fight us even harder."

'Damn straight,' came Marc's defiant reply.

Marc's anger and fear for Bright Moon feed into the churning pain in their shared body until the Soul whimpered, 'Please...stop.' The constant drumming of Marc's rage was mixing with already present nausea. Sicken
ing to the Soul. Relenting at the suffering he was causing, Marc reluctantly pulled back his anger. Letting it fade into the background. Bright Moon worked to calm the body. When the worst of the sickening feeling became tolerable, he wheezed out, "Paz is evil… Monstrous…Their entire race…All the death they caused…"

"You think you know so much," replied Alex with a sad shake of his head. "That's all they've ever been? Destroyers? Killers without a conscious? Their entire race worthy of no other description than 'Vulture'?"

Bright Moon laid back upon the thin mattress and took a few deep breaths. Willing Marc's body to be still. "I know what they did when they came to Origin. The suffering they created."

"No," replied Alex calmly, "what you have are inherited memories. And like any memory, they are not infallible. Yours were passed down over many millennia. Interpreted and reinterpreted over the generations. Can you be certain no details were lost?"

"You claim to know differently?" asked a skeptical Bright Moon.

Alex looked thoughtful for a moment. "I claim a viewpoint as an impartial third party. Someone who's reviewed records from both races. Put facts together. Made educated guesses. I won't declare it's the absolute truth. Just a different interpretation of the known facts."

"And your explanation of the Vultures' acts on my homeworld?"

"They made a mistake," answered Alex simply. "The Vulture colonists on your world didn't understand the symbioses of your kind with your original host race. They thought you were merely a parasite living off a larger unintelligent creature."

"That's not possible," pushed back Bright Moon. "We tried to talk with them. Let them know the harm they were causing. They never responded to us."

"I'm saying the cruelties the Vultures visited upon your people were largely unintentional. Not that they were perfect," argued Alex. "They just misunderstood your attempts at communication and didn't realize you were sentient."

"They would have to be willfully ignorant to not know."
"Oh?" said Alex with a raised eyebrow. "The Souls never made such a mistake? Didn't realize another species' intelligence? I think the Walking Flowers of Fire World would have something to say about that."

The burgeoning protest from Bright Moon was derailed by surprise at the man's knowledge. Alex was once again proving to be exceptionally educated about the Souls. A hint of a grin started to grow on his face as he saw Bright Moon's startled expression.

"Oh, we've learned a good a deal about you Souls. The Facility was created to stop your kind. And you've seen some of Doctor Dobson's medical research." Alex noted the look of disgust on the Soul's face and nodded. "Yes, I understand her work would be quite deplorable to you. But we were simply learning how your kind functioned. However, we've studied everything about you. Your history, culture, technology. A comprehensive understanding of our enemy."

"And what conclusions have you made about us?"

Alex's easygoing smile vanished. "That your race is the most dangerous and destructive one in existence."

If it were not for his somber tone in his voice that underlined his seriousness, Bright Moon would have believed Alex was joking. Indignation grew in the Soul. "Destructive!? How can you say that? If you really have studied my people, you would know we bring only peace and proprietary to our host races. We only want what is best for all. We have never destroyed, only persevered life."

Even in his momentary anger, Bright Moon felt an inkling of sorrow. "You are right, we do make mistakes. Coming to Earth was…wrong. More than a few of us understand that now." Perhaps it was a lost cause, but the Soul fixed Alex with a pleading stare, and added, "We should be trying to end our war. Not continue it. Let no one else die."

Alex eyed Bright Moon for a long time. Then with a return of his more cheerful attitude, he said, "Well, let's put a pin in that. I've got a few questions about the planet you grew up on, Bright Moon. Mist World, was it? The planet of the Bears?"

More than a little suspicious at his quick change of mood, and the very unpleasant nature back in his office when Alex last grew inquisitive, Bright Moon cautiously answered, "What do you want to know?"

Yet genuine curiosity brewed on Alex's narrow face. "What was the planet like? What did you do there?"

"The world is a harsh one," began Bright Moon. "Glacier ice covers the planet. It is desolate but starkly beautiful in its own way. Very little in the way of vegetation, except in the oceans, and most of the water is still covered in ice. But its thin enough to let light through for the plants. We call the indigenous race Bears because they have a passing resemblance to Earth's polar bears. They have created massive crystal cities out of sculpted ice. Sanctuaries on the vast frozen plains."

"I'd heard about those, they sound fascinating," said Alex with an eager nod. "To build an entire city out of ice must take real skill."

"It does," readily agreed Bright Moon. "Bears that are sculptors and artisans are greatly revered. You see, they sculpt with hands. Carving giant blocks of ice. It can take years, decades even, for them to form a new construction. They build giant spires that reach up into the sky."

Bright Moon paused in remembrance of the beautiful cities. "They truly are amazing sights."
"How tall are these towers?"

"Oh," considered Bright Moon as the Soul tried to make sense of memories of the grand cities of the Bears into human terms. "Maybe about a thousand feet tall."

"Impressive," said Alex. "But did they use anything other than ice to build their cities?"

"I don't believe so," replied Bright Moon. "Why would they?"

"Well, ice is obviously readily available for the Bears. But there are problems with building everything out of it." Alex looked down at his hands. "I've always had a bit of an engineering streak in me. I know load bearing support isn't that great for ice. Stone and brick can offer better strength. Or even more advanced materials like cement or steel. The Bears have anything like that?"

Uncertain where Alex was going with his questions, Bright Moon just shook his head. "I really wouldn't know. I didn't work on the cities."

"Well, what did you do?"

"Like on Earth, I was a Seeker."

"Ahh," said Alex with an unfriendly smile. "Rounding up Bears for insertions. Making sure you had every host available for your kind. Hunting down any type of resistance."

"It wasn't like that," defended Bright Moon. "Mist World has been settled for a long time. There wasn't any resistance. The Bears' offspring were born and inserted without issue. Seekers on that world dealt with external threats. There are a few wild bears, but they were more of a nuisance than any type of danger."

"These wild bears couldn't get themselves organized to fight back?"

"Not the same," said Bright Moon with a shake of his head. "They were more of a cousin race. More primitive. Umm…a bit like your Neanderthals. We Souls didn't bond with their kind particularly well, and they mostly lived in the upper highlands. Very inhospitable. No, we dealt mostly with Claw Beasts and other dangerous animals."

Alex made a small 'huh' noise in the back of his throat as he processed Bright Moon's answers. "So, the Bears completely lost their world. You Souls sucked up their entire race."

Bright Moon looked away, uncomfortable. "Yes," replied the Soul, barely above a whisper. "How long ago?"

A frown formed on Bright Moon's face. "I'm sorry?"

"How long ago," repeated Alex. "When did your people first get to that ice ball of a planet?"

"I'm not sure. A good deal of time has passed since we arrived. Thousands of years, I'd guess."

Alex steepled his fingers together. "Twenty-five thousand years sound about right?"

"I suppose," replied Bright Moon. Again wondering just what Alex was driving at with his line of questions.

"It is," confirmed Alex. He grew thoughtful. "Have to admit you Souls are quite the record keepers. I figure it's an important detail when it comes to running your empire. Helped a lot when
we were learning about all the planets and races you Souls have conquered. I'd already worked through your data and did the math to figure it out."

Bright Moon felt a rise of exasperation. "Then why do ask me questions when you already know the answers?"

"Truth be told, Bright Moon," replied Alex. "I'm doing this more for Marc than you. I've got him… well as a captive audience. I hope to educate him."

'What is he going on about?' asked a confused Bright Moon to Marc.

'No idea,' answered Marc. 'I think he just likes to hear himself talk.'

Alex was once again speaking. "…While comparing one race's development to another is not always easy, I believe the Bears were originally roughly equivalent to the humans around the late bronze age. They had a society social structure. Language, both spoken and written. Simple tools and a basic grasp of technology."

"That sounds more or less correct with what I know of the Bears' history," agreed Bright Moon.

"So where are they now?" asked Alex with renewed intensity. "What accomplishments have the Bears made since your kind took over? I mean according to you the Souls bring only peace and prosperity. So, they've had twenty-five thousand years of your harmony. Why the Bears must have built many massive crystal cities. Explored their entire world and beyond. Works of amazing art and science. Maybe they've even started modifying their entire planet's climate to better fit their civilization."

Bright Moon stared back at the man with only growing confusion. "What do you mean? They have their cities of course…"

"How many cities?"

"Twelve altogether."

Alex nodded once as if confirming some little detail and smiled. "Just twelve cities since the Souls arrived? They didn't build more?"

"Like I said," replied Bright Moon with strained patience. "The planet's ecology is harsh. It's difficult to expand their population."

"The Souls have the technology to change that, don't you?"

"But we come to experience, not to change…"

"Exactly!" shouted Alex with triumphant glee. "Exactly," he repeated with an exalted breath as if there was some great revelation in the Bright Moon's words. "The hallmark of the Souls' philosophy – We come to experience, not to change."

"And why is that so wrong?" challenged Bright Moon.

"Because the Bears are trapped. You Souls barely altered anything, so their society and progress have stagnated. In twenty-five thousand years nothing of significative has changed for them," explained Alex with calm patience.

"In contrast, in that amount of time humanity has gone from a bunch of nomadic tribes in the stone
age to a modern civilization. Because growth, real growth, can't happen without change. It's an inevitability." Alex paused, looking a little embarrassed. "I'll admit our way can be messy. With all our wars and violence. But in the end, we've become so much more."

"Yet not for you Souls. You are risk adverse race. You play it safe whenever you can. And in all things, your instinct is to preserve and save." Pausing for a moment, he let out a sigh. "I suppose that can be seen as a noble quality. But in your great effort to preserve life, all you're doing is trapping it. Like a fly stuck in amber. Those Bears have been rebuilding the same twelve crystal cities for the last twenty-five thousand years. In another twenty-five thousand years, they'll still be doing it. Under your control, they'll just keep doing the same damn thing till their sun grows cold." He shook his head sadly. "And it's not just the Bears. It's all the races you've taken over. The Flowers, the Dragons, the Bats. Again and again, I saw the exact same pattern – you kind take over a world, take over the people, and then let nothing of consequence change."

Now Alex implored directly to Bright Moon's body. "Marc, you've lived among them. You must have seen it. The Souls took over and started planting flowers, painting pictures, and going on picnics. Little else changes, and if they continue, nothing ever will. In their minds they've already created a utopia, so why would they change anything? Instead, they keep recycling the same ideas over and over."

"And so the Souls' harmony leads to stasis. Stasis leads to stagnation. Stagnation ultimately leads to decay. As I said before, they bring nothing but destruction."

Alex leaned forward and tapped his finger against the metal floor. "Nor is this some deep conspiracy among some Souls to keep the truth hidden from others of their own kind. The data is just sitting there, out in the open for any of them. Took me only a few hours of reviewing their records on other races' population growth and rate expansion to see the truth." He waved a dismissive hand at Bright Moon. "But none of the Souls see it. They're blind to the destruction they cause."

"And now I bring our conversation full circle," said Alex. "Bright Moon, you say the Vultures must have been willfully ignorant to not know you were a sentient race? I say there was nothing for them to know. Your race is an old one, much older than the Vultures. But in all the time you lived on Origin, you Souls accomplished...nothing. No cities. No science. No art. Not even the written word."

"Because here, Marc, is the ultimate truth about the Souls. They didn't have a civilization until they stole it from the Vultures. They have always been an empty race. Taking everything. Having nothing of their own."

He gave Bright Moon a pitying smile. "It's not your fault. Not really. It's just your nature as a parasite. To take and never give anything back. If your kind had only stayed on Origin, none of this would be necessary." Then Alex's smile dropped away, and his eyes grew hard. "But you didn't. And now you're spreading...like a cancer through the cosmos. And you must be stopped. Not just for humanity's sake. But for everyone in the galaxy."

With a tired sigh, Alex rose to his feet. "So, yes, I've hurt a lot of people. I've done terrible things that will haunt me for the rest of my life. Set events in motion that killed millions. But everything I've done has been for the greater good. All those deaths, all those sacrifices, will not be in vain. To take on the Souls across all their worlds will take centuries and require the deepest of commitments. Humanity must come together and rise as one for this fight."

The door behind him opened with a loud reverberating boom. Without taking his eyes off them, Alex took a step backward into the waiting darkness outside. "Take some time to think on what I've
said, Marc. You may hate me, but I think deep down you know I'm right.” He took another step and added, "Think on the possibilities, Marc. We could do great things together." The cell door began closing again, rumbling on its tracks. Just before it passed in front of Alex, his easygoing smile made one last appearance. "I'll be waiting…”

Chapter End Notes

The villain, the bad guy, the enemy. There are so many types. The insane, the hateful, the greedy, the ones hell-bent on revenge. But for me, the villain most terrifying is the one who will make you say - "What if they're right?"

Next Chapter - Back to LA where Wanda and Jared discover a disturbing result to those exposed to CURE. Meanwhile Sunny and Jodi run into an unexpected problem.

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