In Regards to Myself

by songstar13

Summary

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One

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The familiar scene enveloped me, and I remembered it like it had happened yesterday. For all I'd known at the time, it had. The months I had spent trapped inside my body, the months that it had been Wanderer's body, were gone. I remembered only the desperate flee from the Seekers and the plunge down the elevator shaft. The remembering was quick.

The memory ended, and I became aware of my surroundings. The very fact that I was alive confused me. The fall down the elevator shaft had not killed me, but I had not expected to wake up again. I had certainly not expected to retain control of my body, as I clearly did. I could hear the sound of another person nearby. I kept my eyes closed, pretended I was still unconscious. I didn't know why I was still here, still myself, but I wasn't going to complain, and I wasn't going to draw attention to myself.

I didn't understand, however. The Seekers had caught me, hadn't they? By some impossible miracle, was it possible that they had left me to die at the bottom of the elevator shaft? I could not imagine the worms being so careless. Not after the way they had pursued me, tried to stop me from making the not-quite-suicidal plunge to what I had hoped would be my death. Too bad it wasn't.

A voice interrupted my thoughts, a voice I knew, a voice that shattered my awareness. I had never heard the voice in my life, but I remembered it.

"Melanie?"

Memories flooded through my head with the voice, overwhelming me. The Seekers had caught me. But that had been months and months ago. I forced my eyes open, elation spreading from my fingertips to my toes. I had opened my eyes. As I sat up and looked around me, I was the one who was moving my limbs. Me. Not Wanderer.

Pain lanced through me as I thought of her. Gritting my teeth, I pushed away the grief, not ready to deal with it yet. There would be time enough later.

The owner of the voice came into my line of sight as he leaned closer, his hand descending to rest upon my shoulder. There was a note of worry in his kind voice as he spoke cautiously to me.

"Take it easy. I'm not sure you should move about just yet."

I looked at him briefly, and it was disconcerting to see him with my own eyes, without the filter of Wanda's eyes and thoughts. The novelty only occupied me for a second, however, because I was suddenly aware of the other occupant of the room.

The familiar figure stepped out the shadow, almost hesitant. I didn't need to hear his voice or see his face to know who it was. I would know him anywhere.

"Mel?" Jared's voice was hesitant, like his manner, and full of wonder.

Disregarding Doc's warning completely, I bolted off the cot, launching myself into his arms. "Jared!" His arms crushed my body against his, and his mouth covered mine, exactly the way I remembered it had. The moment was only slightly marred by the abrupt memory of the last time he had kissed this body, when it had still been Wanderer. He'd kissed her, kissed her like he loved her. The brief sting of bitterness was lost as my body caught on fire again. His hands were everywhere, marveling,
rejoicing, claiming. I didn't know where my hands were, only that I couldn't get close enough to him, couldn't get enough of him. His lips against mine were torture, and I was burning.

Only one thing could have doused the flame that was consuming me, brought me back to reason and reality. And he walked into the room at that very moment.

"Wanda?" The voice was horrorstruck, choked, strangled almost beyond the point of recognition, but at the sound of that voice, my happiness shattered. The voice awoke a vague, deep ache inside me. It's very existence shocked me, and the intensity of it took my breath away.

I tore myself away from Jared, and that was painful too. My eyes lifted to Ian's tortured gaze, and I swallowed. Our eyes met, and he looked as if he'd been slapped. Before I could open my mouth to speak, to explain that Wanda had gone, he spoke. His voice was unsettlingly soft, as if he didn't have the strength to raise his voice.

"No." Ian looked away from me, looked right at Jared. "What have you done?" His voice was full of all the horror that I knew he must be feeling. His hands clenched into fists, his denial overcome by anger, by pain that fueled the anger.

"Ian-" Jared started, but Ian interrupted him.

"Shut up." Ian's voice was dangerously soft, deceptively calm. He was close to breaking. Jared fell silent, his arm sliding around my waist and pulling me closer to him. My body burned, but for once, it was easily ignored.

For a moment, there was silence. No one moved. Then there was a blur of movement, a lurch, and the sound of flesh impacting flesh. Jared groaned, clutching his jaw. Ian stood for a moment, looking at us both, then turned on his heel and ran.

"Jared!" My alarm colored my tone as I reached for his face.

"I'm fine," he said, touching my face tenderly. "I probably deserved it."

I shook my head, alarm fading as he removed his hand from his jaw and I was able to ascertain with my own eyes that he was truly okay. There would be an ugly bruise, but the skin was unbroken and there was no blood. "Wanda made her own choice," I said firmly, my heart aching for the brave, amazing soul who'd given her life for me. "She was brave, and she deserved this body far more than I do." My voice broke, shaking. My eyes stung with tears that I did not try to hold back.

Jared's arms went around me as I cried, pulling me into his warm chest. He pressed his lips against my hair, shushing me gently as he wiped at my tears with his hand. "Don't cry," he murmured, pulling my chin up to look me in the face. His eyes traced my features hungrily. "It's not as bad as you think."

I blinked, pulling in a shaking breath. "What do you mean?"

Jared released me from his arms, taking my hand and pulling me over to the corner of the room, where the cryotanks were stacked neatly. One of them had been pulled away from the group. The light was glowing a steady, unwavering red.

This cryotank contained a hibernating soul.
Two

The remainder of the day was a blur of faces and voices. Only a select few encounters stand out in my memory, clear and poignant as they day they happened. Looking back, I am not able to arrange these meetings in a chronological order—overwhelmed as I had been, it is no wonder that I only remember those meetings which meant the most to me.

Meeting Jamie was the hardest. He thought I was still Wanda. No one had told him about the tribunal that had been held earlier that day, and he was too innocent to have ever considered the possibility that Wanda might leave them. To him, she and I were one and the same. Inseparable. To him, Wanda had become a part of everyday life. Ian was the only other person who came close to rivaling Jamie's calm acceptance of our dual personalities, but even Ian had been narrow-minded. His overwhelming love for Wanda blinded him to my situation, a mirror image of the closed-mindedness and disregard for Wanderer that Jared's love for me had fostered.

I remember seeing his face again for the first time. He ran towards me, the everpresent smile on his face, his crown of black hair swinging into his eyes. His hand found its way into mine comfortably. Wanderer's epithet slipped from his mouth, and my heart soared and plunged simultaneously. Finally, finally, I could touch him of my own free will, pull his gangling body against mine in a crushing hug. His hand in mine was warm, and I could feel it. No longer did I crouch in the corner of her mind, imprisoned, grasping at every crumb of affection and love that fell from the table I could not reach.

For a moment I was silent. I did not relish the pain I was about to cause him. Seeing him in pain was heartbreaking, and if there had been any way to prevent it, I would not have told him about Wanda. Jamie looked up at me, and as my name followed on the heels of Wanderer's, I was spurred into speech.

"Jamie," I said, my voice cracking a little. I cleared my throat, squeezing his hand. He squeezed back, encouraging. I almost couldn't find my voice. "Jamie, This is Mel."

A moment of confusion clouded his bright face, like a wisp of cloud passing in front of the sun. His confusion dissipated as his eyes lit up, and he smiled widely.

"Mel!" He said, all but jumping into my arms. "Mel, you're here!" He hugged me fiercely, words spilling from his lips in a rapid torrent. I didn't try to understand what he was saying. His reaction was so incongruous with the news I had imparted that I knew he did not understand. I allowed him to continue, nodding vaguely at his inquiries.

Jamie's mind slowly caught up with his mouth. His words faltered, then stopped. After a brief pause, he looked up at me. His face was a mask of perplexion.

"Mel, Jared…” he faltered for a moment. "Jared said that Wanda didn't know how to let you out."

It was not a question, and so I, wanting to fend off his pain for as long as possible, nodded. "Jared's right." I glanced back at the man in question, and the anguish must have shown on my face, because he reached out and touched my face gently. He gave me a small smile of encouragement, though it was not untouched by regret. Jared didn't want to cause Jamie pain any more than I did.

"Did you guys figure it out?" I think Jamie had already realized the truth, but the innocent hope in his voice tore my heart into tiny pieces.

"No." I shook my head, my voice soft. "No, we didn't figure it out."
Jamie was very still for a moment. I could almost see the internal struggle within him. For a few short seconds, he held out. Abruptly, his face crumpled, and he hid his face from me, pressing into my shoulder. As if that would hide his tears. I could feel his body shaking with the sobs, hear them despite his attempt to muffle them in my shirt.

"Jamie," I crooned, pulling him onto my lap and pushing my fingers through his hair like Wanderer and I had used to. I no longer remember who used this method of comfort first. It could have been something Wanda picked up from me, or vice versa. There are a lot of those kinds of things now. "Jamie, Jamie, Jamie."

I rocked him on my lap slowly. It was not until Jared’s thumb brushed across my cheekbone, wiping away the tears that wet my face, that I realized I was crying too. Sharing Jamie’s grief, lamenting that he had loved Wanderer too, and that it was causing him pain now. I had few words of comfort to offer him: Even though Jared had prevented her intended suicide, there was no guarantee that she would ever return to us. Many in the caves were still hostile to her. They might prevent any attempt to return the self-sacrificing soul to our midst.

Eventually, his sobs eased, though his breathing remained shaky. We sat together for a while longer, none of us saying anything. I was reminded of the vigil of silence that Wanderer had kept when grieving her brethren that had been sliced up in an attempt to discover the secret that had ultimately led to this very moment.

Jamie’s breathing calmed slowly, though silent tears still streaked down his face. Pure emotion, they dropped from his lashes onto my shirt. Two dark blotches in the fabric revealed where he had pressed his face against me.

When even the tears had ceased to slide down his cheeks, I brushed the dark hair out of his face and pressed my lips to his forehead gently. The sleeping boy did not react, and I sighed, pulling myself to my feet without relinquishing my hold on him. Jared would have carried him for me, but I wanted to do this myself.

Half dragging, half carrying him, I made my way back to the sleeping quarters. Jared followed, my incongruous shadow. I had a feeling that he would never let me out of arms reach again.

When I reached the right room, the one with the green screen pulled over the entrance, Jared swept it aside for me. I struggled forward, crossing the scant few steps to the edge of the bed and deposited my burden gently but gratefully. Oblivious to the world, Jamie’s only response was to roll over onto his side. Sighing, I brushed the hair out of his face yet again, hoping his dreams would be happier than reality was at the moment.

Meeting Jamie was the hardest.
Three

My integration into the community was both harder and easier than I had expected.

It was harder because those who had been close to Wanderer didn't seem to know how to act around me. They had never known me as Melanie. It must have been hard for them. It was Wanderer's body, but I was not Wanderer.

It took a while for the knowledge that Wanderer no longer inhabited my body to penetrate into the general consciousness. There were several times within the first few weeks when Lily or Trudy seemed to forget that I was Melanie now. One of them would look up from their work, a request or comment on their lips, only to have the words die in their throats when their eyes met mine. In those moments, it was painfully obvious to all involved that I had been forgotten.

I hated the way their eyes slid over me, uncertain, any time I entered a room. I had no reason to be treated like a pariah, but so it was. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life here as a sometime outcast, accepted by some, avoided and unacknowledged by others. The worst part was that none of Wanda's friends was anything but polite. If I asked Lily to hand me a bar of soap in the washing room, she would do so without the slightest hesitation or ill-grace. It was the same for the rest. If I asked them a question, they would answer readily enough, albeit with impersonal, vague responses and fake, plastic smiles.

I could not complain that anyone had been outright rude or unkind to me, and yet I felt as alienated as if I were the target of malicious activities or open dislike. The worst part was that I knew that they did not mean to make me feel that way. The discomfort they displayed was merely a result of uncertainty and unfamiliarity, but I could find no way to melt the ice between us. What could I say? 'I'm sorry that I didn't disappear like most hosts?'

It was harder because Ian would not speak to me. He avoided eye contact like the plague, and unless absolutely necessary, refused to remain in the same room for any length of time. He was in pain, and his pain tore a hole in my chest. I'd promised Wanderer that I would try to help him as best I could, but that was a hard thing to do when he hated me.

I was surprised by how much his hatred stung. Each little snub drove splinters of ice into my heart. I was anguished to realize that I loved Ian too. I loved him, and it was different than the way Wanda had loved him, because I did not want to love Ian. I finally understood the agony that loving Jared must have caused Wanderer. Loving someone who despises you is not a pleasant experience.

I didn't want him to hate me, because even though I'd despised him for disregarding me while Wanderer had possessed this body, I genuinely liked him. I knew we could be good friends if the situation was different, and I regretted that his love for Wanderer prevented that. Though in comparison, Ian's distaste for me was a mere pittance compared to the open hostility and anger he reserved for Jared. I think he blamed Jared for making my repossession of my body so vitally necessary. I wondered if he thought that Jared was responsible for influencing Wanderer to make the decision that had removed her, however indefinitely, from their midst.

Several times, even after Ian became acquainted to the truth of the situation, his hostility almost broke out into open violence. It was torture for me on these occasions, because I could not bear to see the man I loved and the man I did not want to love hurting each other. The sight of blood made my stomach turn. Another byproduct of Wanderer's presence, I suppose, as I had never used to be squeamish.
It was harder because I knew that behind the smiles and happy faces that greeted me, there was an underlying grief and regret. I felt guilty for being here in her place. She had done more for these people than I would ever be able to do. I felt like an intruder. It was unreasonable, but when I looked into their smiling, welcoming faces, I felt like a monster. How was I any better than the parasites I had claimed to hate? Wanderer had had a life here. And I'd taken it from her.

Sometimes I truly hated Wanderer for what she had done. She had left me adrift in a world that I was not familiar with, plagued by feelings and emotions that were not mine. More so than having temporarily stolen my body and mind from me, these offences were near unforgivable. I was forced to muddle my way through the mess of pain and confusion she'd left behind her, while she slept through it all, oblivious. If I could only give her a piece of my mind! But the irony of the statement did not fail to strike me, and my anger was suddenly defused by the grim amusement that replaced it.

It was easier because I had Jared. He rarely left my side, and his hands were always touching me. The resulting burn distracted me from the worries and regrets that plagued me. His kisses burned away the pain, burned away everything except the feel of his lips against mine. When I was wrapped in his embrace, I had no opportunity to dwell on the less pleasant aspects of my new life.

If I had Jared, I could walk through fire and come out unscathed. Jared made everything happy. When he was around, it was as if the stars strove to shine a little brighter. Drawn, tense faces and unhappy thoughts could not exist in this world when Jared was there. He was a charm against pain and suffering, a shield from unhappiness and melancholy. When Jared was there, the world was glowing. Like a bug to a light, my eyes were drawn repeatedly to his beautiful face. In his arms, I was enveloped in a bubble of joy, and nothing could ruin my happiness.

It was easier because I was not new to life in the caves. Though some of the others had initially been unsure of me, their apprehensions were easily overcome. They warmed up quickly when I assumed the role that Wanda had played in their small society. I could not be what she had been to them, but I could still work just as hard.

I threw myself into my chores with enthusiasm, eager to prove my worth. I made sure to be the first up in the mornings and the last done working at night, though Jared and Jamie protested that I didn't have to prove myself to anyone. I disregarded them completely. Of course I had to prove myself. Even if I was only proving it to myself. If I was not just as hard-working and helpful as Wanderer had been, then I did deserve to have taken her place among them. Jared told me countless times that life in the caves did not work that way. People were not accepted or rejected according to their ability to benefit the community as a whole. If that were true, he told me, then many of the current inhabitants wouldn't even be there.

It was easier because I was human, and I belonged there. Wanda had told me the same thing countless times as she had contemplated her impending removal from the scene, but I had never really believed it. I was accepted without question by most, though many still grieved for Wanda. I was one of them, and they would not turn me away or cast me out.

This sentiment did little to comfort me, because in truth it was an ideal they held onto only because they had to. If the human race were not in such danger from extinction, I was sure that they would not be so accepting. I had clearly seen the tortured expressions on many faces whenever Lacey came around. Given their choice, free of an obligation to the dwindling remainders of humanity, I was almost certain that the obnoxious woman would have been sent packing long ago.

I admit, the first time I met the Seeker's body, I was torn between a desire to flee and a desire to attack. It was a few days after my return to control and possession of my body, and word of my 'arrival' had long since permeated the small society. I guess I should have seen it coming, but
somehow I had forgotten about her in the chaos and general confusion.

The specifics of the time and place of the meeting escape me now, though I distinctly recall the feeling of her gaze resting upon me. It took me a moment to recognize her bulbous eyes, though my hair stood on end and my mouth had gone dry.

"Hey. It's Melanie, right?" The hated voice startled me. I reacted instinctively to the perceived threat; my fingers curled into fists, my pupils dilated, and my muscles tensed in preparation of either fight or flight, though to this day I'm unsure which. Adrenaline coursed through my veins with each beat of my heart, which contrived to pump blood to my body more quickly even as it leapt into my throat. My mind reacted more slowly, still frozen in shock as I lifted my eyes to meet hers.

She had not changed much. Understandable, for the last time I had seen her had been mere days ago (Something I remembered with startled surprise). It felt as if the conversation between Wanda and the former Seeker had taken place in another lifetime. Her eyes were the same: bulbous and opened too-wide, though they were flat and unremarkable without the silvery sheen of a soul behind them.

It took only a moment to comprehend that there was no real danger. My mind thawed, and I berated myself for stupidity and cowardice. I could not help the way my stomach wrenched with distaste. I had spent far too many months loathing and fearing the face before me; my revulsion was instinctive. I swallowed, trying to dislodge the lump in my throat. "Hey." I was relieved that my voice didn't tremble. I could not bear to give her the satisfaction of knowing how she terrified me.

"Must be nice to finally have that worm out of your head."

It took me a moment to comprehend her meaning. Worm? It had been a long time since I'd thought of Wanderer with any trace of dislike. It was hard to reconcile myself to the knowledge that I'd once held this self-same opinion of her.

I shrugged, and it was a short, restricted movement, because the muscles in my shoulders and back were still tense. I had no obligation to tell this self-righteous stranger that, in truth, I would have done anything to keep Wanda from forcibly removing herself.

The short woman folded her arms over her chest. I flinched at the unexpected movement. I broke eye contact momentarily, my gaze flying to her hands, searching for a weapon or other evidence of ill-intent. When our eyes met again, less than a second later, I would have sworn I saw vindictive satisfaction and amusement in her expression. Dislike left a sour taste in my mouth.

She appraised me a moment more before speaking again. "I thought you would have been ecstatic to be rid of her."

"Wanderer was a good person," I forced the words out through my teeth. My tone was acid. "She was my friend, and I loved her."

She seemed taken aback. Her eyes widened in surprise briefly, before she blinked and the sneer I knew so well settled back onto her face. It looked far more natural there than the sugar-and-cyanide smile that had been her dominant expression up to this point.

"Oh." The word dripped with disdain. "So she got to you too, huh? I thought you of all people might be a little less gullible, but I can see I was wrong. You're just like everyone else, so smitten with her you can't see her for what she really is-a rotten, insidious parasite."

The expression in her eyes was truly venomous as she turned on her heel and strode away. I watched
her go, my jaw clenched against the words I longed to throw after her retreating form. Words like 'spiteful' and 'bitch' and 'selfish'. Hurtful, barbed words that would open her eyes to how little liked she was and how much better off everyone else had been without her. I held my tongue, not because I didn't think I couldn't take the shrimpy woman in a fight, but because I didn't want to defile Wanda's sacrifice. She'd turned traitor on everyone she'd ever known, just to save that one human. What she'd never done for me, she'd done for Lacey, and it seemed wrong to demean that with ugly words.
Four

Maggie and Sharon were another story entirely. They were among the first to hear the news of my return. My first impression of our reunion is that of a flame of red hair bobbing rapidly toward me. A gray cloud followed the flame at a slower but no less enthusiastic pace. Then vision disappears in a crush of arms and bodies and disembodied voices. It took me a moment to process the situation.

Maggie and Sharon had caught me up in a tangled hug. I was unable to distinguish which body parts belonged to whom until they withdrew from the embrace some minutes later. I looked into their faces and did not recognize them. After so many months of seeing these faces drawn taut and unforgiving by the harsh lines of anger, hatred, and bitterness, the softer emotion of joy made them unfamiliar and strange.

They welcomed me back with profuse warmth and enthusiasm, exclaiming excitedly. Such an about face in attitude, though not unforeseeable in retrospect, was unnerving.

I didn't know how to react.

"Melanie! It's good to see you again!" Sharon fawned over me. Her hands clasped mine tightly. Maggie echoed her daughter's greetings faithfully. Her wrinkled, bony hand grasped my shoulder with surprising strength. The aging woman might have looked slight, but there was strength yet in her wiry frame. We Stryders were made of tougher stuff.

I made some generic reply, unable to forget how they'd been bent on hating Wanderer. Even when she'd proved herself again and again. Even when she'd risked her life to save Jamie. Even when she'd refused to speak against Kyle, despite the fact that it was clear to everyone that he'd tried to kill her. The two women had clung to their hatred just to spite Wanda.

I looked over their faces, and it occurred to me that I had never been overly fond of Aunt Maggie. My memories of the family reunions are fuzzy but solid. She'd always been a grouchy, strict aunt. Any time I spent the night at her house, I was put to bed promptly at 8:00 pm, even after my parents had long since extended my bedtime to nine. Her house was not very kid friendly-breakables and collectibles crowded almost every flat surface. There was to be no running, no shouting, no 'horseplay'. In general, no fun-at least in the eyes of my nine-year-old self, anyway. The visits to her house were typically dull and uneventful. There were rare occasions when Aunt Maggie would have some great surprise planned out for my stay. Trips to the ice cream parlor, the zoo, the water park. Aunt Maggie was stern, but she'd never been downright mean.

My opinion of Sharon was much higher. Growing up, I idolized Sharon. Because she was an adult, she was automatically awarded a higher status than other cousins who were my age or younger. She was roughly 20 years older than me, though she acted as though she were ten years younger than her age. My favorite cousin from the time I met her, in my eyes, Sharon could do no wrong. My hero-worship only made it that much harder to realize that when all was said and done, she turned out little better than her bitter, unforgiving mother.

Her maturity, coupled with the fact that she epitomized everything I hoped to be when I was her age, instantly bestowed her with a level of regard and esteem that easily forgave or overlooked any and all shortcomings. My visits to Sharon's house were decidedly more enjoyable than to her mother's. She almost always had something fun or interesting planned out for us to do: shopping, spa days, trips to the zoo, mini-golfing, and even Disney Land one time.

Sleepovers at her house were epic. I'd bring over a friend or two if I wished, and the night would be
spent watching movies, making popcorn and ice cream sundaes and cookies, doing each other's hair
and make-up, making forts, telling scary stories, and staying up as late as we could. As a rule, the
first to fall asleep was the target of devious pranks and tricks. And in the morning, despite all the late-
night shenanigans, Sharon would be up and making pancakes and bacon for breakfast. She’d make
them just the way I liked them: chunks of banana hiding in the batter, topped with whipped cream
and extra syrup.

At age nine, I'd placed my image of Sharon on a pedestal. At age 20, I stood looking at the remains
of that image. It had fallen from the pedestal at some point, shattering upon the unyielding floor. No
trace of those jagged jigsaw pieces remained. The base of the pedestal was surrounded by a gritty
powder. Each small piece of the image I had created as a child had been trodden on without remorse,
until the pieces had been rendered into this dusty powder. A small breath would blow every trace of
it away.

Mother and daughter must have felt each inconsequential word as if it were a separate splinter of ice.
Sharon stepped away from me as though she'd been slapped. I did not mention Wanderer or the time
I'd spent trapped inside my own head, but the words were weighted with the implications of
everything that I'd witnessed during that time. Needless to say, the two of them didn't demand my
attention for much longer.

I could imagine what Wanderer would have said. She'd have made some excuse for their inexcusable
behavior, used the defense that they were human and she was not, argued that their hate and anger
were warranted because she, Wanderer, was in the wrong. Wanderer would have wanted me to be
reconciled to my family. But Wanderer wasn't here anymore. What*she* would have said and done
was a moot point.

I had the good fortune of being present when the two women heard the news that Wanderer was still
alive. Their expressions hardened and cracked simultaneously. My distaste morphed into disgust and
disdain as I watched the all-too-familiar snarls of hate return to their faces. As I looked at them, I saw
all the vices and failings of humanity as a whole represented in these two individuals I had the
misfortune of calling family. In that moment, I saw why Wanderer and her kind had thought we
might not deserve this beautiful planet. I understood, as she had put it, how the souls might have felt
that they could 'do better'.

Looking at my aunt and cousin, I had to admit that I didn't completely disagree with them.
And so, without my consent, life went on. It did not seem right for life to continue as normal without Wanda. My only experiences of these caverns and tunnels had been gleaned through Wanda. She was a central part of my perception of this world. Some part of me expected life to come to a screeching halt in light of her absence. Needless to say, it did not.

Jared was a constant presence at my shoulder. Even in the short time since my return, I could not remember a time when I could not feel the warmth of his body next to mine or the feel of his gaze upon me. It got to be so commonplace that I felt almost naked without it. When daily life in the caves forced us more than an arm's reach apart, the familiar weight of his burning gaze was a near-constant sensation. It distracted me at times when I should have been focusing on the task at hand. My mind drifted ahead through the hours of work and conversation, skipping forward to the time when I would next find myself enveloped by his embrace. These kinds of daydreams often sparked a slow, inexorable burn in the region of my abdomen.

After that first day, Jamie's eyes had remained resolutely dry. His pain, at least, had been short-lived, for he was enlightened to Wanderer's state of hibernation by Doc the day after her removal. Back to his old cheerful self again, he spoke of her frequently. He talked as if the separation was a necessary evil, but one which he expected to be over soon. Almost every conversation brought some mention of Wanderer's return. To him, the event was unquestionable.

Though I wished for the same outcome no less fervently than my younger brother, I could not be so sure of its occurrence. Whenever the topic arose between us, unease twisted my stomach into unnatural shapes. Maggie and Sharon's furious faces kept flashing through my head. The Seeker's face joined theirs after I encountered the three women talking together in furtive, heated voices. I had been making the long trek down the south tunnel to see Doc when I ran into them. When they'd noted my presence, all conversation halted abruptly, and the three women eyed me with unmasked hostility and suspicion. I returned the gaze openly, though the sinister implications of such a secretive rendezvous made me uneasy. I was suddenly relieved that Ian had taken it upon himself to 'guard' Wanderer's cryotank.

Most everyone had heard news of my return and Wanderer's hibernation within 48 hours of the event, but by some unhappy chance, Ian was the last to find out. This is perhaps due to his complete self-absorption at the time, coupled with his inability to remain in the same general vicinity of Jared or me for any length of time. Most surprising of all, however, turned out to be the bearer of the news: Kyle managed to tear himself away from Jodi's bedside long enough to pull his lovesick brother's head out of the sand.

Once aware that all hope was not lost, Ian tore down the southern tunnel like a man possessed. It has since been rather jokingly suggested that he set a record for the fastest one-way trip down to Doc's secluded cave. Upon arrival, he pulled the cryotank into his arms as gently as if he were afraid it might shatter in his hands. Once the tank was in his embrace, he refused to put it down for more than a moment and vehemently denied anyone else the privilege of touching it. At night, he fell asleep with his arms curled around the rectangular form, and in the morning he awoke in the same position. I knew from Wanda's memories that it was Ian's habit to sprawl across his mattress once unconsciousness had subdued him, but I'm sure that his arms never once relinquished their hold on that cryotank, conscious or not.

The pain had left his eyes since he'd acquired possession the cryotank, and if he didn't quite forgive Jared and me for our parts in separating him from his love, he certainly did a good job
During the times when I had a chance to speak to him, the conversation invariably centered on Wanda. I explained, as best I could, her plan to leave us. That particular discussion brought pain to his eyes again, and I felt wretched for putting it there. I did my best to conceal the battle that I was waging against a faint but insistent echo of that pain in my own heart. Loving Ian hurt. I felt as though I was being torn apart along the vague line that demarcated the boundary between heart and soul.

I told him everything I could I remember. I told him how completely and unquestionably she'd loved him. I told him the story of how she'd come-unwillingly-to love Jared. I told him how it had pained her, how she'd been so hurt by his unmasked revulsion and hatred of her, and I could not fail to see the irony of that particular conversation. We talked endlessly about Wanderer's thoughts, for he never seemed to run out of questions regarding the way her mind worked. Ian consumed my words like a man who had been drowning might consume oxygen. He seemed almost jealous at times, like he envied me the intimacy which resulted from sharing a consciousness.

A lot of my time was spent down the southern tunnel. Between my Wanda-centric conversations with one brother and my frequent presence at Jodi's bedside in an attempt to help the other, I probably saw more of that one small cave than most of the other caverns and tunnels combined (excepting perhaps the room which Jared and I shared).

Jamie had moved out of the small room shortly after my return. He made some gruff excuse about the whole affair, but his face was red and he couldn't meet my eye. Through my amusement, I rather felt sorry for him. He'd long since learned about the birds and the bees, and needed no further explanation of my relationship with Jared.

Doc allowed Kyle to continue his endeavour to reawaken Jodi for eight days after Sunny's removal. On the ninth day, he spoke up. The kind doctor chose his words carefully when he approached the notoriously short-tempered O'Shea brother. On the whole, however, Kyle remained remarkably calm through the discussion.

"Kyle, I know Jodi is important to you, but if you continue in this line of inquiry, it could have detrimental effects on her health." Doc's tone was not unkind.

The dark haired man was silent for a moment. His face was careworn and weary, as if he'd aged five years in nine short days. "Explain."

Doc sighed, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I'm not talking about nutrition or hydration," he commenced, his eyes drifting to the IV that stuck out of the unconscious woman's arm. "If she remains inactive like this for much longer, her muscles will start to atrophy."

Kyle swallowed, his jaw clenching. "In plain English?"

Doc allowed himself a brief smile. "Muscle atrophy," he repeated. "When an individual stops exercising for prolonged periods of time, the muscle begins to waste away. It was a problem most often encountered with astronauts who were stationed in low-gravity conditions for indefinite lengths of time. In that case, a rigorous workout was developed to counteract the effect of reduced gravitational forces. As you can see, that is not an option here."

"What are you saying?"

Doc pulled one hand out of a pocket to rub his face tiredly. "If we keep her in this inactive state much longer," he explained, "Jodi's muscles will dissolve. When—if—she wakes up, she'll be weak. Like a baby. It would take time to rebuild the muscle necessary even for daily activity—"
"What are you saying?" Kyle interrupted Doc abruptly. His voice was harsh with impatience.

There was a heavy pause.

"I think we should bring Sunny back."

The pronouncement did not shock me. Doc had approached me a few days after my reawakening with this very idea upon his lips. He'd sought my assistance, for though he proved to be skilled the art of removing souls, he was lost as to how one might go about inserting one. This is where I come in. Having had a direct link to Wanderer's mind, her memories of the procedure were easily available to me, and I was a necessary part of the proceedings.

Kyle lowered his head and stared at the ground. I watched him as the moments turned into minutes, and I was unable to decipher the tenor of his thoughts. It seemed to me that many hours had passed before Kyle spoke again.

"Do it."
The procedure itself was relatively simple. Jodi was already unconscious, but Doc administered a small dose of anesthetic just to be sure. With the help of Wanderer's wonder drugs, he quickly and easily opened up a neat cut along the back of her neck. He traced the faint pink line that betrayed the previous insertion with precision.

It was at this point that I became important. Working as quickly as I dared, I fiddled with the controls on Sunny's cryotank. It took a few moments for it to transition from hibernation mode to insertion mode. I used the time to squash any feelings of anxiety. When the light on the top of the tank glowed bright, vibrant blue, I unlatched the lid, popping it open gently and making sure not to jostle it unnecessarily. Reaching into the cool interior, I gathered the soul into my hand carefully. It was surprisingly warm, with a weight I had not expected.

I paused for a moment, just to look at her. Sunny fluttered calmly in my palm. The movement tickled—just a light brushing of the soft, smooth body against my sensitive palm; a pleasant sensation. In that moment, the full brunt of the situation struck me. Only a few short months ago, I'd have bet on both Jamie and Jared's lives that if I ever got the chance to touch one of these creatures, it would be to kill and destroy. Never would I have imagined myself doing something like this—at least not willingly.

Turning to the body, I gestured at Doc to hold the incision open. He obliged me readily. I coaxed the silver creature into the opening. It slid willingly, trustingly, out of my hand, settling into the opening easily. Doc and I watched, fascinated, as Sunny elongated. She reached up into regions unseen, binding herself to the body. In a few short seconds, the soul had settled and was still. I exhaled, backing away as Doc finished up the procedure, sealing the incision closed and slapping a bit of Smooth over the faint line to prevent unsightly scarring.

Kyle stepped forward as Doc retreated from the still figure. He grinned at me.

"Bet you never thought you'd be putting one of them into one of us," he remarked as he grasped Jodi's-now Sunny's-shoulders and rolled her onto her back.

I smiled back. "No, I never imagined I would."

Kyle turned back to the unconscious soul on the operating table. A heavy silence descended upon the scene. I moved to stand near Jared, who had been a silent presence for the duration of the insertion. He leaned against the wall, a thoughtful expression on his face.

When I met his gaze, he gave me smile, and my heart skipped a beat. I sucked in a steadying breath as he folded me into his embrace. Jared's arms encircled me, holding me about the waist as my back pressed into his chest. His chin rested on my shoulder and each breath tickled the side of my face.

"Well done," he murmured into my ear, his voice low so that only I would hear. A gentle squeeze, accompanied by a soft kiss to my shoulder, followed these words.

Within a few minutes, Sunny awoke.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she took a deep breath. Doc and Kyle both leaned over her, and she cringed away from them violently. Kyle reached out to touch her hand reassuringly.

"It's okay Sunny. Doc's not going to hurt you."
Sunny's eyes focused on Kyle's face, and relief flooded her expression. Before she could utter much more than his name, however, Doc interrupted. He smiled at Sunny as he grasped her wrist to check her pulse.

"How do you feel, Sunny?" he asked, uncertainly.

"Fine," she answered quietly, her eyes leaving Kyle's face briefly.

Doc nodded, releasing Sunny's wrist as he peered into her eyes clinically. "No weakness? No discomfort?"

The soul shook her head, her eyebrows furrowing. "No. Why would there be?"

Doc seemed thrown off by the question. "Well-I don't know. I'm not exactly sure how the process works, so I don't know what to expect," he explained.

Sunny's expression cleared. "Oh."

Doc frowned. "I wish I understood your anatomy better," he murmured, looking at Sunny with a perplexed curiosity. "How am I supposed to know if there's something wrong?"

Sunny looked back him, but she couldn't hold the gaze. Her eyes kept returning to Kyle's face, as if to make sure he was really there. "I-I don't know much about it," she said. "I was never a Healer. I was a Grower; I raised plants."

I thought I could detect a note of regret in Sunny's tone as she said this, and I wondered if she was worrying about her plants. Without her there to take care of them, they had probably all died by now. It occurred to me that Sunny would be happy when she found out about the gardens we cultivated for our food.

Doc nodded, straightening up. "Alright. I'm going to get Jeb. He'll want to know about Sunny's return so he can decide how to announce the information to the others," he said. Kyle nodded absentmindedly. Doc turned and strode purposefully up the passage, disappearing quickly into the darkness. The sound of his footsteps grew steadily fainter, until they faded into silence completely.

I wondered how Jeb would react to the news. I highly doubted that he would be much surprised-Jeb was unusually perceptive about these kinds of things, and there was very little that ever threw him for a loop. Knowing Jeb, he was probably expecting something like this to happen. It would be a shock to the rest of them, though. No one other than those involved had been informed of the plan to reinsert Sunny into Jodi's body. I could see the wisdom in this decision. Although Wanda had been well-liked by the majority of the community, I could not see them being pleased to hear that Doc had moved past simply removing souls from human bodies and was now putting them back in.

Doc and Jeb returned sooner than I had expected. Their footsteps echoed down the tunnel, long preceding their arrival, and I saw the anxious expression that flashed across Sunny's features as she looked up at Kyle, seeking reassurance. He smiled at her, patting her small hand awkwardly. She was instantly reassured. I wondered at her blind trust in him, as volatile and violent as he could be. Her certainty bespoke a knowledge of Kyle that I could only guess at.

Kyle had seated himself on the operating table, next to Sunny. The two were not touching, but her eyes were fixed solemnly on his face. I thought I could detect a hint of longing in her gaze, as if she wished to touch him but didn't dare. Every so often, Kyle would look down into her eyes for a moment. I watched him curiously. He seemed at a loss, unsure what to think of this timid soul who gazed at him so unwaveringly.
Sunny had yet to utter a single word since Doc's exit. I had expected her to be confused, but from the moment her eyes had opened, she had been calm and unquestioning. Did she already understand why she'd been brought back?

It was easy to see that Sunny had loved Kyle long before she'd met him. Of his feelings I was less sure. He was not repulsed by her, nor did he display any hint of anger or frustration toward her. There was a kindness in his manner that I had not anticipated, yet there was a shadow of sorrow there, too.

I was interrupted from my musings by the entrance of Doc and Jeb. Jeb gave Sunny an appraising look before he turned his faded denim eyes on Kyle. "Well now," he said slowly, scratching his chin, "Ain't this a pretty picture?"

Kyle looked away from Sunny with relief, fixing his eyes upon Jeb. "Doc said he thought it would be best." There was a note of uncertainty in his voice.

My uncle nodded, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he leaned against the wall lazily. There was a moment's pause before he turned his attention upon the soul once more. "Sunny," he addressed her gruffly.

She started, clearly surprised at being so directly addressed. She turned to Jeb, her eyes wide with apprehension. She shrunk back, towards Kyle, as if attempting to hide behind him. "Yes?" Her voice quavered.

Jeb's tone softened, and I saw the recognition flash behind his eyes: Sunny was just as timid and frightened as Wanda had been. "Sunny, Kyle loves the girl who used to be in that body."

Hurt spread across the soul's expression. There was a hesitating pause, then she nodded slowly. Her eyes slid to Kyle's face. His jaw was set resolutely. "I—I know," Sunny replied, lowering her gaze. I felt a sharp stab of pity for her.

Jeb leaned toward her, nodding. "I figured as much," he said quietly, more to himself than to her. He paused briefly before continuing. "You care about Kyle, right?"

Sunny nodded miserably.

"Then you understand what he's asking you to do."

Sunny sighed, then straightened, lifting her chin as she looked up at Jeb. "He wants me to look for Jodi," she replied, her gaze flicking to Kyle once again.

Jeb nodded. "That's right." His eyes drifted away from Sunny and fixed on Kyle. There was a piercing, searching quality to that look that made me wonder how much Jeb suspected of Kyle's feelings for the woman and the soul who had replaced her.

Kyle returned the gaze steadily, but I thought Ian's brother looked less sure of himself than he would have liked.
The days that followed were punctuated by anxiety and distrust. Once again, I found myself the target of fear and suspicion. The same day that I'd inserted Sunny, Jeb had called everyone together in the meeting room. The news of Sunny's return was met with unease and apprehension by the majority of the community.

Souls had long ceased to pose a threat (because of Wanderer's presence), but I could tell that even so, the denizens of caves were less than pleased with our decision to put one of them into one of us, whether the body was 'occupied' or not. It was common knowledge that I had been the one to reinsert the soul—hence the fear and suspicion. No doubt many were questioning my motives. Perhaps they wondered if I'd been brainwashed during my extended time as a soul's prisoner.

In earlier days, this mistrust would have disturbed me, but months spent trapped inside my own head had helped me prioritize things more efficiently. I had my glowing little circle of friends and family—what did it matter what anyone else thought of me?

I was almost happy. Only one thing was missing: Wanderer. Her absence was a constant irritation. A tiny, invisible cactus needle in my finger—not outwardly visible, but recognized and felt internally each moment.

Sunny was ostracized from the better part of the cave society, but I could find no trace that she either cared or noticed. From the moment she'd regained consciousness, she'd attached herself to Kyle like an incongruous shadow. Impervious to the hostility and suspicion directed at her by the humans she lived among, she spent her time watching him. The gruff human male, however, was not quite so unruffled. He revealed a charmingly sensitive and protective streak in regards to her.

Following the announcement of Sunny's return, Jamie's talk of bringing Wanda back only increased. He had been inspired by the circumstances surrounding Sunny's return, and was continually bringing it up.

"Mel, Mel, Wanda left us because she didn't want to be a 'parasite', right?" He asked excitedly.

I sighed. Jamie had already asked me this several times. "She couldn't let herself live at the expense of another person," I replied patiently.

"So if we got a body that didn't have anyone in it, she'd be okay with it, wouldn't she?"

I had to admire his unfailing optimism. "In theory, yes."

What Jamie didn't realize was that Wanda's return didn't depend on whether she'd feel guilty in her new body or not. The real obstacle was much harder to overcome. Wanderer hadn't been brought back yet because a sizeable portion of the humans living here did not welcome the idea of putting souls back into human hosts. It was clear from the treatment Sunny and I received that the idea was unpopular.

Unsurprisingly, the three most prominent adversaries to Wanderer's return were Maggie, Sharon, and Lacey. They spread fear and doubt, inciting the others against me, against Sunny, against Wanda. How could anyone be sure that I hadn't been brainwashed, they asked (ever since our run-in in the southern tunnel, they'd dropped all pretense of friendliness). Why should I stop at one soul? How many human lives would be thrown away to save the disgusting centipedes? Now that we had the tool to rid the planet of the parasites (they cleverly neglected to mention that this particular weapon
would as yet unknown to us if not for Wanda), why shouldn't we use it to our advantage? Bringing
them back among was detrimental to that end.

Tensions in the caves heightened, and the perceived threat of Wanderer’s cryotank loomed large in
the eyes of her enemies. Ian’s paranoia reached new levels, and as the discontent mounted a small
group of ‘guards’ took it upon themselves to escort him wherever he went. I was distinctly reminded
of the times before Wanderer had become an accepted member of the community.

Mistrust and unrest were paramount in our small haven, but there were none who harbored greater
dislike for Wanderer than Lacey. I often wondered exactly what threat she saw in the small cryotank
that housed the soul’s small body. The Seeker had already been shipped off planet by now—did she
think we’d put another one in her? It was beyond me.

Jeb’s shotgun made a reappearance after an assassination attempt, headed by Lacey, was foiled. The
repulsive woman had gathered a select few of her anti-soul followers into a small group. They made
their move in the dark hours of the night, long after everyone else had succumbed to the enveloping
warmth of sleep. Sneaking into Ian’s room, they’d been thwarted in their plans only by his relentless
hold on the cryotank—he’d woken with a loud shout the instant someone had tried to pry it from his
arms. Needless to say, Jeb was displeased. The next morning, the shotgun was tucked firmly under
his arm.

The ordeal lent urgency to Jamie’s ceaseless entreaties. Ian’s face grew haggard, and he lapsed into
taciturn silence. Several times I caught him gazing listlessly into space, his cheek pressed against the
cool side of the cryotank. The stillness of his features reminded me of my silent conversations with
Wanda, as though he were wrapped up in some internal discussion. Wanderer needed to return, and
quickly.

We’d all been thinking it, but it was Jared who finally put the though into words. "We just need to do
it," he announced gruffly. Jamie, Doc, Ian, Kyle, Sunny, and Jeb were all gathered in a semicircle
around the entrance to the mess hall. The cave were quiet—almost everyone had already turned in
for the night. "Before they can object or complain." There was no question as to who he meant by
'they'.

So hatched our secret plan.
The alley was dim, but clean. It was nearing the end of the day, and as the sun began to sink back towards the western horizon, I shifted restlessly. We'd been at this for several hours already, and the tension mounted with each passing moment. This was our one and only chance to secure a body for our beloved Wanderer, and time was running short.

The trickle of souls passing by our hiding spot was beginning to slow as evening approached, and they returned to their homes. Countless faces had passed before us, each wearing the same tranquil, serene expression. It was unsettling to see each new face molded into the same shape—it was inhuman, as if they were dolls or robots.

Jamie and Jared were getting restless. Jared's face was drawn into taut lines; his eyes were hard, focused. Jamie was less severe, though his focus was no less intense. Just as the bitter taste of defeat and failure rose up from the back of my throat, Jared grunted. He glanced at me, jerking his head towards the street beyond. A girl has emerged from the house directly across from us. She's so small, so delicate and fairy-like. The body across from us holds no threat of danger. Violence, anger, hate—these emotions are incompatible with the angelic, child-like face. She is innocence and goodness incarnate. Tearing my eyes from the girl, I glance at my family. Jared is grinning; Jamie's eyes are glowing with excitement.

"That's her, Mel," he whispers fervently. "That's Wanda!"

I grin at his exuberance. "I think so too," I reply.

Deceiving her was almost too easy. These souls, they are too naive, too trusting for their own good. The right words and a few smiles and she was ours.

The drive back home was filled with Jamie's triumphant chatter. I tried to keep up with him at first, but after ten minutes it became clear that he neither needed nor really expected my input.

By the time we got back to the caves, only those involved in the plan were still awake. Doc and Jeb met us at the entrance. Their faces betrayed their anxiety and uncertainty in the moments before they recognized the fourth body we were carrying with us. Relieved smiles broke across their faces like sunlight piercing through storm clouds. In near silence, our group traversed the path to Doc's cave. Pet's removal was swift and flawless. As I tipped the silver body into an empty cryotank, I could hear Doc moving behind me, closing the incision.

The days that followed seemed to drag on endlessly. We took turns sitting by Pet's bedside, trying out all the names we could think of. For the first time, I found myself hoping that there wouldn't be a response, that the body would remain as empty and unresponsive as Jodi had been. I wondered at the human capacity for selfishness then. Wanderer, in her selflessness, had betrayed her race, and I, in my selfishness had betrayed mine.

The monotonous days wore greatly on Ian. Each day he grew more impatient, more restless. If it were up to him, I'm sure he'd have reinserted Wanda after the second day. I understood his haste, but we couldn't risk putting Wanderer into an occupied body. It would be beyond cruel to both her and the body's original owner. So we waited.

By the fourth day, he'd rooted himself in place next to Pet's cot. He refused to leave the small room
even for meals, and Jamie took it upon himself to bring food down to him at meal times. Ian's absence went largely unnoticed, as he'd isolated himself since Wanderer's removal. The periodic disappearance of the others, however, was more conspicuous. Curious gazes followed us as we tried to keep up the appearance of normalcy.

The majority of the community accepted the cover story without question. The small stash of healing supplies that Wanderer had provided was beginning to dwindle, and several of the cryotanks had been filled. Jamie, Jared, and I had left the caves under the pretense of a supply run. Since there had been a recent raid, there was no need for a large group or an extended run, and we were able to finish up in a single day.

I'd been surprised that Ian hadn't demanded to accompany us on the raid when the idea had first come up. He had a vested interest in the body that was brought back, and more right than any of us to make the decision. He'd kept silent, wrapped up in his own little world that revolved around the cryotank he clutched against his heart while we formulated our plan.

It went without saying that I would go; I knew her better than any of them. Jamie had been the first to recognize our duality and the first to love Wanda, and he'd been the most adamant about her return. Jared's decision to go surprised me almost as much as Ian's apathy. It meant a lot to me—and I knew it would mean even more to her. He'd hated her the most. For him to go so far to bring her back now revealed just how much had changed.

Ian had refused to come with us. He didn't care what she looked like, he claimed, and it was impossible to doubt him when he held her Cryotank so desperately. The face really was meaningless to him—he'd fallen in love with the consciousness behind the face, with the soul that inhabited the body.

I don't think I'd really appreciated the depth of Ian's feelings up until that moment. It had been hard to respect his feelings when he so callously disregarded mine. And even after that, it seemed unlikely that he could have developed an emotional attachment that could rival mine in strength when he'd never known her as I had. Compared to my love for her—love that even warred with my love for Jared—how could he compete? Wanderer had been too confused, too overwhelmed to love him as I loved Jared, and because she was torn between two loves, I had unconsciously underestimated the potential of his love for her.

And so I watched him suffer through the last days of separation with a new understanding and appreciation for the heartache he must have been enduring. And then the day came for her return. Seven days of unrelenting anxiety before Doc intervened.

I was 'on duty', still trying half-heartedly to get a response out of the comatose body. My words had long since ceased to make any sense to me as I held this stranger's hand. The words had regressed to meaningless sounds that echoed, unfamiliar, in my head.

"Mel, I think that's enough."

I stopped my droning, glancing up at Doc. Ian blinked and looked up as well, coming out of his stupor for the first time in several hours. The look of hope on his face was radiant. For his sake, I hoped Doc wasn't merely relieving me for the day.

"It's been a week. If there hasn't been a response by now, there probably won't be."

I watched as Ian's hand disappeared into the cryotank. His expression was awestruck as he lifted the palm-sized, gleaming silver soul that was Wanderer out of the protective container. No one spoke for
a moment. The cave was silent but for the soft rustle of cloth and the quiet whirr of the cryotank.

"Ian," Doc intoned gently, indicating that the body was ready. I talked him through the process of insertion, describing what to expect once he had placed her in the opening, and how to check that she was bound in the optimum position.

It was over in seconds.

A few minutes later, Wanderer opened her eyes. Her tenth life had begun.

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