

Inserted

The Healer's name was Fords Deep Waters.

Because he was a soul, by nature he was all things good: compassionate, patient, honest, virtuous, and full of love. Anxiety was an unusual emotion for Fords Deep Waters.

Irritation was even rarer. However, because Fords Deep Waters lived inside a human body, irritation was sometimes inescapable.

As the whispers of the Healing students buzzed in the far corner of the operating room, his lips pressed together into a tight line. The expression felt out of place on a mouth more often given to smiling.

Darren, his regular assistant, saw the grimace and patted his shoulder.

"They're just curious, Fords," he said quietly.

"An insertion is hardly an interesting or challenging procedure. Any soul on the street could perform it in an emergency. There's nothing for them to learn by observing today." Fords was surprised to hear the sharp edge marring his normally soothing voice.

"They've never seen a grown human before," Darren said.

Fords raised one eyebrow. “Are they blind to each other’s faces? Do they not have mirrors?”

“You know what I mean — a wild human. Still soulless. One of the insurgents.”

Fords looked at the girl’s unconscious body, laid out facedown on the operating table. Pity swelled in his heart as he remembered the condition her poor, broken body had been in when the Seekers had brought her to the Healing facility. Such pain she’d endured. . . .

Of course she was perfect now — completely healed. Fords had seen to that.

“She looks the same as any of us,” Fords murmured to Darren. “We all have human faces. And when she wakes up, she will be one of us, too.”

“It’s just exciting for them, that’s all.”

“The soul we implant today deserves more respect than to have her host body gawked at this way. She’ll already have far too much to deal with as she acclimates. It’s not fair to put her through this.” By *this*, he did not mean the gawking. Fords heard the sharp edge return to his voice.

Darren patted him again. “It will be fine. The Seeker needs information and —”

At the word *Seeker*, Fords gave Darren a look that could only be described as a glare. Darren blinked in shock.

“I’m sorry,” Fords apologized at once. “I didn’t mean to react so negatively. It’s just that I fear for this soul.”

His eyes moved to the cryotank on its stand beside the table. The light was a steady, dull red, indicating that it was occupied and in hibernation mode.

“This soul was specially picked for the assignment,” Darren said soothingly. “She is exceptional among our kind — braver than most. Her lives speak for themselves. I think she would volunteer, if it were possible to ask her.”

“Who among us would not volunteer if asked to do something for the greater good? But is that really the case here? Is the greater good served by this? The question is not her willingness, but what it is right to ask any soul to bear.”

The Healing students were discussing the hibernating soul as well.

Fords could hear the whispers clearly; their voices were rising now, getting louder with their excitement.

“She’s lived on six planets.”

“I heard seven.”

“I heard she’s never lived two terms as the same host species.”

“Is that possible?”

“She’s been almost everything. A Flower, a Bear, a Spider —”

“A See Weed, a Bat —”

“Even a Dragon!”

“I don’t believe it — not seven planets.”

“At least seven. She started on the Origin.”

“Really? The Origin?”

“Quiet, please!” Fords interrupted. “If you cannot observe professionally and silently, then I will have to ask you to remove yourselves.”

Abashed, the six students fell silent and edged away from one another.

“Let’s get on with this, Darren.”

Everything was prepared. The appropriate medicines were laid out beside the human girl. Her long dark hair was secured beneath a surgical cap, exposing her slender neck. Deeply sedated, she breathed slowly in and out. Her sun-browned skin had barely a mark to show for her . . . accident.

“Begin thaw sequence now, please, Darren.”

The gray-haired assistant was already waiting beside the cryotank, his hand resting on the dial. He flipped the safety back and spun down on the dial. The red light atop the small gray cylinder began to pulse, flashing faster as the seconds passed, changing color.

Fords concentrated on the unconscious body; he edged the scalpel through the skin at the base of the subject’s skull with small, precise movements, and then sprayed on the medication that stilled the excess flow of blood before he widened the fissure. Fords delved delicately beneath the neck muscles, careful not to injure them, exposing the pale bones at the top of the spinal column.

“The soul is ready, Fords,” Darren informed him.

“So am I. Bring her.”

Fords felt Darren at his elbow and knew without looking that his

assistant would be prepared, his hand stretched out and waiting; they had worked together for many years now. Fords held the gap open.

“Send her home,” he whispered.

Darren’s hand moved into view, the silver gleam of an awaking soul in his cupped palm.

Fords never saw an exposed soul without being struck by the beauty of it.

The soul shone in the brilliant lights of the operating room, brighter than the reflective silver instrument in his hand. Like a living ribbon, she twisted and rippled, stretching, happy to be free of the cryotank. Her thin, feathery attachments, nearly a thousand of them, billowed softly like pale silver hair. Though they were all lovely, this one seemed particularly graceful to Fords Deep Waters.

He was not alone in his reaction. He heard Darren’s soft sigh, heard the admiring murmurs of the students.

Gently, Darren placed the small glistening creature inside the opening Fords had made in the human’s neck. The soul slid smoothly into the offered space, weaving herself into the alien anatomy. Fords admired the skill with which she possessed her new home. Her attachments wound tightly into place around the nerve centers, some elongating and reaching deeper to where he couldn’t see, under and up into the brain, the optic nerves, the ear canals. She was very quick, very firm in her movements. Soon, only one small segment of her glistening body was visible.

“Well done,” he whispered to her, knowing that she could not hear him. The human girl was the one with ears, and she still slept soundly.

It was a routine matter to finish the job. He cleaned and healed the wound, applied the salve that sealed the incision closed behind the soul, and then brushed the scar-softening powder across the line left on her neck.

“Perfect, as usual,” said the assistant, who, for some reason unfathomable to Fords, had never made a change from his human host’s name, Darren.

Fords sighed. “I regret this day’s work.”

“You’re only doing your duty as a Healer.”

“This is the rare occasion when Healing creates an injury.”

Darren began to clean up the workstation. He didn't seem to know how to answer. Fords was filling his Calling. That was enough for Darren.

But not enough for Fords Deep Waters, who was a true Healer to the core of his being. He gazed anxiously at the human female's body, peaceful in slumber, knowing that this peace would be shattered as soon as she awoke. All the horror of this young woman's end would be borne by the innocent soul he'd just placed inside her.

As he leaned over the human and whispered in her ear, Fords wished fervently that the soul inside could hear him now.

"Good luck, little wanderer, good luck. How I wish you didn't need it."

Remembered

I knew it would begin with the end, and the end would look like death to these eyes. I had been warned.

Not *these* eyes. *My* eyes. Mine. This was *me* now.

The language I found myself using was odd, but it made sense. Choppy, boxy, blind, and linear. Impossibly crippled in comparison to many I'd used, yet still it managed to find fluidity and expression. Sometimes beauty. My language now. My native tongue.

With the truest instinct of my kind, I'd bound myself securely into the body's center of thought, twined myself inescapably into its every breath and reflex until it was no longer a separate entity. It was me.

Not *the* body, *my* body.

I felt the sedation wearing off and lucidity taking its place. I braced myself for the onslaught of the first memory, which would really be the last memory — the last moments this body had experienced, the memory of the end. I had been warned thoroughly of what would happen now. These human emotions would be stronger, more vital than

the feelings of any other species I had been. I had tried to prepare myself.

The memory came. And, as I'd been warned, it was not something that could ever be prepared for.

It seared with sharp color and ringing sound. Cold on her skin, pain gripping her limbs, burning them. The taste was fiercely metallic in her mouth. And there was the new sense, the fifth sense I'd never had, that took the particles from the air and transformed them into strange messages and pleasures and warnings in her brain — scents. They were distracting, confusing to me, but not to her memory. The memory had no time for the novelties of smell. The memory was only fear.

Fear locked her in a vise, goading the blunt, clumsy limbs forward but hampering them at the same time. To flee, to run — it was all she could do.

I've failed.

The memory that was not mine was so frighteningly strong and clear that it sliced through my control — overwhelmed the detachment, the knowledge that this was just a memory and not me. Sucked into the hell that was the last minute of her life, I was she, and we were running.

It's so dark. I can't see. I can't see the floor. I can't see my hands stretched out in front of me. I run blind and try to hear the pursuit I can feel behind me, but the pulse is so loud behind my ears it drowns everything else out.

It's cold. It shouldn't matter now, but it hurts. I'm so cold.

The air in her nose was uncomfortable. Bad. A bad smell. For one second, that discomfort pulled me free of the memory. But it was only a second, and then I was dragged in again, and my eyes filled with horrified tears.

I'm lost, we're lost. It's over.

They're right behind me now, loud and close. There are so many footsteps! I am alone. I've failed.

The Seekers are calling. The sound of their voices twists my stomach. I'm going to be sick.

"It's fine, it's fine," one lies, trying to calm me, to slow me. Her voice is disturbed by the effort of her breathing.

"Be careful!" another shouts in warning.

"Don't hurt yourself," one of them pleads. A deep voice, full of concern. Concern!

Heat shot through my veins, and a violent hatred nearly choked me.

I had never felt such an emotion as this in all my lives. For another second, my revulsion pulled me away from the memory. A high, shrill keening pierced my ears and pulsed in my head. The sound scraped through my airways. There was a weak pain in my throat.

Screaming, my body explained. *You're screaming.*

I froze in shock, and the sound broke off abruptly.

This was not a memory.

My body — she was *thinking!* *Speaking* to me!

But the memory was stronger, in that moment, than my astonishment.

"Please!" they cry. "There is danger ahead!"

The danger is behind! I scream back in my mind. But I see what they mean. A feeble stream of light, coming from who knows where, shines on the end of the hall. It is not the flat wall or the locked door, the dead end I feared and expected. It is a black hole.

An elevator shaft. Abandoned, empty, and condemned, like this building. Once a hiding place, now a tomb.

A surge of relief floods through me as I race forward. There is a way. No way to survive, but perhaps a way to win.

No, no, no! This thought was all mine, and I fought to pull myself away from her, but we were together. And we sprinted for the edge of death.

"Please!" The shouts are more desperate.

I feel like laughing when I know that I am fast enough. I imagine their

hands clutching for me just inches behind my back. But I am as fast as I need to be. I don't even pause at the end of the floor. The hole rises up to meet me midstride.

The emptiness swallows me. My legs flail, useless. My hands grip the air, claw through it, searching for anything solid. Cold blows past me like tornado winds.

I hear the thud before I feel it. . . . The wind is gone. . . .

And then pain is everywhere. . . . Pain is everything.

Make it stop.

Not high enough, I whisper to myself through the pain.

When will the pain end? When . . . ?

The blackness swallowed up the agony, and I was weak with gratitude that the memory had come to this most final of conclusions. The blackness took all, and I was free. I took a breath to steady myself, as was this body's habit. *My body.*

But then the color rushed back, the memory reared up and engulfed me again.

No! I panicked, fearing the cold and the pain and the very fear itself.

But this was not the same memory. This was a memory within a memory — a final memory, like a last gasp of air — yet, somehow, even stronger than the first.

The blackness took all but this: a face.

The face was as alien to me as the faceless serpentine tentacles of my last host body would be to this new body. I'd seen this kind of face in the images I had been given to prepare for this world. It was hard to tell them apart, to see the tiny variations in color and shape that were the only markers of the individual. So much the same, all of them. Noses centered in the middle of the sphere, eyes above and mouths below, ears around the sides. A collection of senses, all but touch, concentrated in one place. Skin over bones, hair growing on the crown and in strange furry lines above the eyes. Some had more fur lower down on the jaw; those were always males. The colors ranged through the brown scale from pale cream to a deep almost-black. Aside from that, how to know one from the other?

This face I would have known among millions.

This face was a hard rectangle, the shape of the bones strong under the skin. In color it was a light golden brown. The hair was just a few shades darker than the skin, except where flaxen streaks lightened it, and it covered only the head and the odd fur stripes above the eyes. The circular irises in the white eyeballs were darker than the hair but, like the hair, flecked with light. There were small lines around the eyes, and her memories told me the lines were from smiling and squinting into sunlight.

I knew nothing of what passed for beauty among these strangers, and yet I knew that this face was beautiful. I wanted to keep looking at it. As soon as I realized this, it disappeared.

Mine, spoke the alien thought that should not have existed.

Again, I was frozen, stunned. There should have been no one here but me. And yet this thought was so strong and so aware!

Impossible. How was she still here? This was me now.

Mine, I rebuked her, the power and authority that belonged to me alone flowing through the word. *Everything is mine.*

So why am I talking back to her? I wondered as the voices interrupted my thoughts.