

THE HOST

A NOVEL BY
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Prologue – 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 we were 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?”

“Quietl, 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-browed 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 girl'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.”

Chapter 4 - Dreamed

It is too dark to be so hot, or maybe too hot to be so dark. One of the two is out of place.

I crouch in the darkness behind the weak protection of a scrubby creosote bush, sweating out all the water left in my body. It's been fifteen minutes since the car left the garage. No lights have come on. The arcadia door is open two inches, letting the swamp cooler do its job. I can imagine the feel of the moist, cool air blowing through the screen. I wish it could reach me here.

My stomach gurgles and I clench my abdominal muscles to stifle the sound. It is quiet enough that the murmur carries.

I am so hungry.

There is another need that is stronger—another hungry stomach hidden safely far away in the darkness, waiting alone in the rough cave that is our temporary home. A cramped place, jagged with volcanic rock. What will he do if I don't come back? All the pressure of motherhood with none of the knowledge or experience. I feel so hideously helpless. Jamie is hungry.

There are no other houses close to this one. I've been watching since the sun was still white hot in the sky, and I don't think there is a dog, either.

I ease up from my crouch, my calves screaming in protest, but keep hunched at the waist, trying to be smaller than the bush. The way up the wash is

smooth sand, a pale pathway in the light of the stars. There are no sounds of cars on the road.

I know what they will realize when they return, the monsters who look like a nice couple in their early fifties. They will know exactly what I am, and the search will begin at once. I need to be far away. I really hope they are going out for a night on the town. I think it's Friday. They keep our habits so perfectly, it's hard to see any difference. Which is how they won in the first place.

The fence around the yard is only waist high. I get over easily, noiselessly. The yard is gravel, though, and I have to walk carefully to keep my weight from shifting it. I make it to the patio slab.

The blinds are open. The starlight is enough to see that the rooms are empty of movement. This couple goes for a spartan look, and I'm grateful. It makes it harder for someone to hide. Of course, that leaves no place for me to hide, either, but if it comes to hiding for me, it's too late anyway.

I ease the screen door open first, and then the glass door. Both glide silently. I place my feet carefully on the tile, but this is just out of habit. No one is waiting for me here.

The cool air feels like heaven.

The kitchen is to my left. I can see the gleam of granite counters.

I pull the canvas bag from my shoulder and start with the refrigerator. There is a moment of anxiety as the light comes on when the door opens, but I find the button and hold it down with my toe. My eyes are blind. I don't have time to let them adjust. I go by feel.

Milk, cheese slices, leftovers in a plastic bowl. I hope it's the chicken-and-rice thing I watched him cooking for dinner. We'll eat this tonight.

Juice, a bag of apples. Baby carrots. These will stay good till morning.

I hurry to the pantry. I need things that will keep longer.

I can see better as I gather as much as I can carry. Mmm, chocolate chip cookies. I'm dying to open the bag right now, but I grit my teeth and ignore the twist of my empty stomach.

The bag gets heavy too quickly. This will last us only a week, even if we're careful with it. And I don't feel like being careful; I feel like gorging. I shove granola bars into my pockets.

One more thing. I hurry to the sink and refill my canteen. Then I put my head under the flow and gulp straight from the stream. The water makes odd noises when it hits my hollow stomach.

I start to feel panicked now that my job is done. I want to be out of here. Civilization is deadly.

I watch the floor on my way out, worried about tripping with my heavy bag, which is why I don't see the silhouetted black figure on the patio until my hand is on the door.

I hear his mumbled oath at the same time that a stupid squeak of fear escapes my mouth. I spin to sprint for the front door, hoping the locks are not latched, or at least not difficult.

I don't even get two steps before rough, hard hands grab my shoulders and wrench me back against his body. Too big, too strong to be a woman. The bass voice proves me right.

"One sound and you die," he threatens gruffly. I am shocked to feel a thin, sharp edge pushing into the skin under my jaw.

I don't understand. I shouldn't be given a choice. Who is this monster? I've never heard of one who would break rules. I answer the only way I can.

"Do it," I spit through my teeth. "Just do it. I don't want to be a filthy parasite!"

I wait for the knife, and my heart is aching. Each beat has a name. Jamie, Jamie, Jamie. What will happen to you now?

"Clever," the man mutters, and it doesn't sound like he's speaking to me. "Must be a Seeker. And that means a trap. How did they know?" The steel disappears from my throat, only to be replaced by a hand as hard as iron.

I can barely breathe under his grip.

"Where are the rest of them?" he demands, squeezing.

"It's just me!" I rasp. I can't lead him to Jamie. What will Jamie do when I don't come back? Jamie is hungry!

I throw my elbow into his gut—and this really hurts. His stomach muscles are as iron hard as the hand. Which is very strange. Muscles like that are the product of hard living or obsession, and the parasites have neither.

He doesn't even suck in a breath at my blow. Desperate, I jab my heel into his instep. This catches him off guard, and he wobbles. I wrench away, but

he grabs hold of my bag, yanking me back into his body. His hand clamps back down on my throat.

“Feisty for a peace-loving body snatcher, aren’t you?”

His words are nonsensical. I thought the aliens were all the same. I guess they have their nut jobs, too, after all.

I twist and claw, trying to break his hold. My nails catch his arm, but this just makes him tighten his hold on my throat.

“I *will* kill you, you worthless body thief. I’m not bluffing.”

“Do it, then!”

Suddenly he gasps, and I wonder if any of my flailing limbs have made contact. I don’t feel any new bruises.

He lets go of my arm and grabs my hair. This must be it. He’s going to cut my throat. I brace for the slice of the knife.

But the hand on my throat eases up, and then his fingers are fumbling on the back of my neck, rough and warm on my skin.

“Impossible,” he breathes.

Something hits the floor with a thud. He’s dropped the knife? I try to think of a way to get it. Maybe if I fall. The hand around my hair isn’t tight enough to keep me from yanking free. I think I heard where the blade landed.

He spins me around suddenly. There is a click and light blinds my left eye. I gasp and automatically try to twist away from it. His hand tightens in my hair. The light flickers to my right eye.

“I can’t believe it,” he whispers. “You’re still human.”

His hands grab my face from both sides, and before I can pull free, his lips come down hard on mine.

I'm frozen for half a second. No one has ever kissed me in my life. Not a real kiss. Just my parents' pecks on the cheek or forehead, so many years ago. This is something I thought I would never feel. I'm not sure exactly what it feels like, though. There's too much panic, too much terror, too much adrenaline.

I jerk my knee up in a sharp thrust.

He chokes out a wheezing sound, and I'm free. Instead of running for the front of the house again like he expects, I duck under his arm and leap through the open door. I think I can outrun him, even with my load. I've got a head start, and he's still making pained noises. I know where I'm going—I won't leave a path he can see in the dark. I never dropped the food, and that's good. I think the granola bars are a loss, though.

"Wait!" he yells.

Shut up, I think, but I don't yell back.

He's running after me. I can hear his voice getting closer. "I'm not one of them!"

Sure. I keep my eyes on the sand and sprint. My dad used to say I ran like a cheetah. I was the fastest on my track team, state champion, back before the end of the world.

"Listen to me!" He's still yelling at full volume. "Look! I'll prove it. Just stop and look at me!"

Not likely. I pivot off the wash and flit through the mesquites.

“I didn’t think there was anyone left! Please, I need to talk to you!”

His voice surprises me—it is too close.

“I’m sorry I kissed you! That was stupid! I’ve just been alone so long!”

“Shut *up!*” I don’t say it loudly, but I know he hears. He’s getting even closer. I’ve never been outrun before. I push my legs harder.

There’s a low grunt to his breathing as he speeds up, too.

Something big flies into my back, and I go down. I taste dirt in my mouth, and I’m pinned by something so heavy I can hardly breathe.

“Wait. A. Minute,” he huffs.

He shifts his weight and rolls me over. He straddles my chest, trapping my arms under his legs. He is squishing my food. I growl and try to squirm out from under him.

“Look, look, look!” he says. He pulls a small cylinder from his hip pocket and twists the top. A beam of light shoots out the end.

He turns the flashlight on his face.

The light makes his skin yellow. It shows prominent cheekbones beside a long thin nose and a sharply squared-off jaw. His lips are stretched into a grin, but I can see that they are full, for a man. His eyebrows and lashes are bleached out from sun.

But that’s not what he is showing me.

His eyes, clear liquid sienna in the illumination, shine with no more than human reflection. He bounces the light between left and right.

“See? See? I’m just like you.”

“Let me see your neck.” Suspicion is thick in my voice. I don’t let myself believe that this is more than a trick. I don’t understand the point of the charade, but I’m sure there is one. There is no hope anymore.

His lips twist. “Well... That won’t exactly help anything. Aren’t the eyes enough? You know I’m not one of them.”

“Why won’t you show me your neck?”

“Because I have a scar there,” he admits.

I try to squirm out from under him again, and his hand pins my shoulder.

“It’s self-inflicted,” he explains. “I think I did a pretty good job, though it hurt like hell. I don’t have all that pretty hair to cover *my* neck. The scar helps me blend in.”

“Get off me.”

He hesitates, then gets to his feet in one easy move, not needing to use his hands. He holds one out, palm up, to me.

“Please don’t run away. And, um, I’d rather you didn’t kick me again, either.”

I don’t move. I know he can catch me if I try to run.

“Who are you?” I whisper.

He smiles wide. “My name is Jared Howe. I haven’t spoken to another human being in more than two years, so I’m sure I must seem...a little crazy to you. Please, forgive that and tell me your name anyway.”

“Melanie,” I whisper.

“Melanie,” he repeats. “I can’t tell you how delighted I am to meet you.”

I grip my bag tightly, keeping my eyes on him. He reaches his hand down toward me slowly.

And I take it.

It isn't until I see my hand curl voluntarily around his that I realize I believe him.

He helps me to my feet and doesn't release my hand when I'm up.

"What now?" I ask guardedly.

"Well, we can't stay here for long. Will you come back with me to the house? I left my bag. You beat me to the fridge."

I shake my head.

He seems to realize how brittle I am, how close to breaking.

"Will you wait for me here, then?" he asks in a gentle voice. "I'll be very quick. Let me get us some more food."

"Us?"

"Do you really think I'm going to let you disappear? I'll follow you even if you tell me not to."

I don't want to disappear from him.

"I..." How can I not trust another human completely? We're family—both part of the brotherhood of extinction. "I don't have time. I have so far to go and...Jamie is waiting."

"You're not alone," he realizes. His expression shows uncertainty for the first time.

“My brother. He’s just nine, and he’s so frightened when I’m away. It will take me half the night to get back to him. He won’t know if I’ve been caught. He’s so *hungry*.” As if to make my point, my stomach growls loudly.

Jared’s smile is back, brighter than before. “Will it help if I give you a ride?”

“A ride?” I echo.

“I’ll make you a deal. You wait here while I gather more food, and I’ll take you anywhere you want to go in my jeep. It’s faster than running—even faster than *you* running.”

“You have a car?”

“Of course. Do you think I walked out here?”

I think of the six hours it took me to walk here, and my forehead furrows.

“We’ll be back to your brother in no time,” he promises. “Don’t move from this spot, okay?”

I nod.

“And eat something, please. I don’t want your stomach to give us away.” He grins, and his eyes crinkle up, fanning lines out of the corners. My heart gives one hard thump, and I know I will wait here if it takes him all night.

He is still holding my hand. He lets go slowly, his eyes not leaving mine. He takes a step backward, then pauses.

“Please don’t kick me,” he pleads, leaning forward and grabbing my chin. He kisses me again, and this time I feel it. His lips are softer than his hands, and hot, even in the warm desert night. A flock of butterflies riots in my stomach and

steals my breath. My hands reach for him instinctively. I touch the warm skin of his cheek, the rough hair on his neck. My fingers skim over a line of puckered skin, a raised ridge right beneath the hairline.

I scream.

I woke up covered in sweat. Even before I was all the way awake, my fingers were on the back of my neck, tracing the short line left from the insertion. I could barely detect the faint pink blemish with my fingertips. The medicines the Healer had used had done their job.

Jared's poorly healed scar had never been much of a disguise.

I flicked on the light beside my bed, waiting for my breathing to slow, veins full of adrenaline from the realistic dream.

A new dream, but in essence so much the same as the many others that had plagued me in the past seven months.

No, not a dream. Surely a memory.

I could still feel the heat of Jared's lips on mine. My hands reached out without my permission, searching across the rumpled sheet, looking for something they did not find. My heart ached when they gave up, falling to the bed limp and empty.

I blinked away the unwelcome moisture in my eyes. I didn't know how much more of this I could stand. How did anyone survive this world, with these bodies whose memories wouldn't stay in the past where they should? With these emotions that were so strong I couldn't tell what *I* felt anymore?