

## Searchers

Quivering, I lay on the floor. Too hurt to move. Too afraid he'd find me again and finish me off not to move.

He'd caught me.

For the first time I could remember, the man, who always seemed to be chasing after me, had actually caught me. How had he done this? What had happened? A scene suddenly flashed before my eyes, I'd been sneaking from the east side of the long hall to the west side.... Yes, I remembered now. The man had walked out of one of the other doors. Simple as that. He'd been looking at something and when he'd looked up our eyes had locked on each other. We'd both been surprised.

"Peter," he whispered. I began backing my way towards the door I'd just stepped past. "No, wait Peter," he said, walking towards me. I'd turned and ran.

"Peter stop!" he called. I couldn't go back through the hidden passageway I'd taken to get to this room. It didn't open from this side. Instead, I'd run into the adjoining bedroom. As the man followed, I ran out the front door of this room and back into the main hallway.

"No Peter, wait dammit!" he yelled, getting closer. Not slowing, I raced down the hall and into the library. Arriving just ahead of him, I shut and with a turn of the bolt locked the door. Before I could even turn away, the man crashed into the door with a loud bang that sounded like it nearly broke the door.

There were three ways out of the library. The hallway door, a hidden way behind the moving shelf, and a crawl space that could be entered via some loose flooring. I didn't have time to pry up the floor. Instead, I ran to the hidden door behind the shelf.

"Peter!" he screamed, becoming madder each passing moment as he pounded on the door. "Open this goddamned door right this instant! Open it or you'll be sorry! So help me God I'll beat your ass 'til it's black and blue! Do it now Peter! Do it now! Open this door right now or I'm going to kill you, you little...." He'd gone on becoming more and more profane. But I had another problem: I couldn't remember which book opened the secret passage.

Frantic, I began pulling on books in the section I was sure the book hid in. Outside, the man kicked the door and it shuddered; once, twice, three times. Many of the books fell to the floor as I hurried but none of them were the key book. Then suddenly the man at the door went silent. This scared me even more. Near panic, I pulled book after book after book. Finally, one of the books jerked back out of my hand and with an audible click the hidden door opened a little bit. With a feeling of profound relief I wrenched it open and stepped into the dark passageway, pulling the concealed door closed behind me.

Moving through the dark was something I did all the time. I knew these lightless passageways very well. Still breathing hard from my scare, I walked quickly down the narrow hall. Without slowing down I passed a hidden doorway that went into the back of a bedroom in another wing. A dozen steps more and I passed a similarly concealed entrance on the other side. That one led to another bedroom. This place had a lot of bedrooms. I continued all the way down to one of the ladders leading downstairs. Just as I put my foot on the ladder, light suddenly flooded into the passageway. Shocked, I turned to see the man standing in a no longer hidden doorway. He seemed to be made up of darkness as bright light streamed in all around him. His eyes were glowing a dull orange which was his only feature I could make out clearly between the light and shadows.

“My last remaining humiliation,” he whispered in between heavy breaths. “Didn’t think I knew about this secret passage, did you? Found it a while ago. Hate these cramped, dark passageways. Just like I hated your mother. She was probably cheating on me even back then. You and your sister both were born from her infidelity. Neither you nor your sister were ever really mine. No. No you weren’t. Couldn’t be. She was cheating on me. Had to be. The nerve of the woman! She dared to tell me you and your sister were mine! But I showed her. Oh yes, I most certainly did. Broke her arms and legs and then killed the girl right in front of her. I knew she’d lied. She had to be lying. She really was cheating on me! Had to be. Otherwise I’d have never killed anyone. It was all her fault! Everything went wrong and it was all because of her! Oh, and I had plans for a nice, lingering death for the cheating bitch. But you just wouldn’t die would you? Instead, you got up and ran. So I had to finish her off fast so I could chase you down. And now look. You’re finally out of room to run.” Knowing he was about to hurt me real bad, I tried to climb down the ladder.

I didn’t make it.

Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity of hurt, one of his kicks sent me flying close to the ladder well. And with a painful pull on one of the lower rungs, I managed to heave myself down into the darkness.

New pains suggested I’d hit a great number of things on the way down. I don’t know how long I lay at the bottom unconscious. Once I awoke, my newly gathered injuries hit me like a monstrous wave but I didn’t make a sound lest he find me that much more quickly.

One thought kept bobbing to the surface of my thoughts: He’d caught me.

I tried to move but I hurt too much. Then I realized how much more pain he’d give me if he came down the ladder after me. That would be worse than bad. I’d fallen all the way down to the bottom of the ladder well and I had to get out of here. I knew without any doubts that I had to get away from this room as quickly as possible.

There was only one normal door leading out of this room. It opened up into a cave. A lot of wine bottles and boxes were stored down here. At the back of the cave was a small opening leading to another cave. It led to another and then another. The last cave was the home of a bear. If you were able to sneak past the bear, you came out close to the playground. Not the easiest path, but not the hardest either. Sadly, in my condition there was no way I could get past the bear.

But there was another way out.

Behind the south wall, another passage was hidden from view behind some easily moved boards. It was a cramped and narrow path. Sometimes I felt that it had been made just for me. It ran a long way through low-ceilinged, cold and slimy caves. There would be a man in those caves too. Not like the man above but not very friendly either. He wore a strange light on his head and carried around a pick. He used the pick for mining. Just what he mined I didn’t know. But what I did know is that he wouldn’t let the bad man through. If he caught me, he’d get mad and throw me out of the caves and into the woods beyond. Normally, it was a quick run from the woods to either the house or the playground.

But not today.

Up on the floor above, there were a number of passages and secret corridors leading to all parts of the house where I could quickly go and be safe. But there was no way I could climb the ladder in my condition.

With a groan, I stretched out my only working arm and pulled myself towards the passage leading to the miner and his mines....

“Sandra?” Rose whispered to me from halfway across Limbo. “Are you alright? I had a sudden premonition that you were in trouble.”

“I suppose you could say that,” I whispered back as I continued to watch Justin sobbing, his face hidden behind his hands even as blood dripped and ran down them. The observatory room seemed very cold today.

“What happened?” she asked, concern for me riding high on her thoughts.

“I almost struck down Justin,” I replied, feeling my eyes harden as I relived that moment of not so long ago when I’d found him and figured out what he’d done anew.

“What?! Oh Sandra, we aren’t here for that purpose. Tell me. Tell me what’s brought your thoughts so close to this.”

“Justin,” I replied coldly. Despite the fact that he could not hear our conversation, the sobbing man shuddered all over before his sobbing overtook him again.

“What...?”

“He apparently caught Peter.”

“Oh no,” her shocked thought barely audible. Time passed and we both remained silent as the murderer continued his nonstop crying into his hands. “Have you... have you found his remains?”

“No,” I whispered back. “I... I was afraid of what I’d find.”

“Gather your courage my friend,” Rose told me with a much more normal strength to her thoughts. “I know Peter is very special to you. Still, your assignment is nearly at an end. One way or another. You’ll either find that Peter yet exists or you’ll take the broken and shattered remains of his soul and toss them into the living cycle, where perhaps the Creator will see fit to give the poor boy another chance at life. Either way, your task is nearly complete.”

“Yes Rose,” I answered quietly, not completely sure that she’d heard me.

Backtracking Justin was not difficult. The trail of dripping blood he’d left was thick and wide. Eventually, it led me through an open concealed door and into a dark passageway. The dust all round this end of the corridor had been disturbed and in many places completely cleaned away by the small body that had been tossed around like a rag doll. Blood had been splattered across a number of places on the walls and the floor. Smearred in many more places.

Slowly, almost unwillingly, I walked to the ladder well. Here the largest of the blood smears ended. Traces of blood were visible on many of the rungs below but I saw no sign of the little boy himself. Spreading my wings, I stepped down and slowly began descending the ladder shaft, my wings folding automatically when it became necessary to pass an opening to another level and then spreading again once through. And nine floors later, I came to the bottom of the ladder well. Much to my surprise, there was no body here. No shattered remains of what had once been a luminous soul. But there was more blood. A lot of it. Clear evidence that his soul was injured and damaged. Badly damaged.

In a way, Peter’s injuries were good. At least so long as his soul didn’t further fragment and shatter from the injuries he’d received. Uninjured, Peter moved like a... well, like a ghost. He left no trail and was impossible to follow. Now he did leave a trail and I would find him.

But at what terrible cost?

Behind the boards I found a narrow passage. It appeared to be a naturally formed cave but was not. A Limbo path. Who knew where it led to? However, at the moment *where* didn’t concern me. Knowing *who* it led to was quite enough. Shrinking down into the shape of a little girl, I began

quickly following Peter's bloody trail.

Before long it widened into a series of muddy caves. Soon, clear water flowed over the floor in a quiet, cold stream. While most of these little caves ran low to the ground, some of them were tall enough to stand up in. And in one of these places a man sat at the edge of the stream panning for gold.

"What the heck?!" he demanded, jumping to his feet and pulling a knife.

Pretending to look scared, I shrieked and shrank away from him. He looked confused and lowered his knife.

"You're not here to jump my claim?" he asked, doubt clearly showing on his face.

"No, no," I assured him quickly. "I'm looking for a little boy. His name's Peter and he's been hurt."

He grunted and put the knife away. I hoped this meant I wouldn't be fighting him. In Limbo, the miner's delusions gave him strength and his psychoses gave him power. While I could take care of myself, I'd rather not risk a fight with this man. At the very least it could quite possibly mean losing Peter again. And for that same reason I also could not take the time to try to save him. No, there were other angels looking to save the likes of this man.

"So you've seen him?" I asked, allowing some of the fear to fade from my face.

"Aye," he agreed, looking down at his pan with what I judged to be an inwardly turned frown.

"What happened?" I asked. "You didn't hurt him did you?"

"No. 'Course not! But the boy was already plenty hurt. Someone musta thought he was jumpin' their claim to bust 'im up like that. Anyway, I gave 'im a blanket and some water. Nuthin' more I could do. Not a doctor. No sirree, I'm no doctor."

"Then what happened?" I asked quietly.

The scruffy looking fellow shuffled his feet before saying, "He rested here a short spell. Then he started eyeing my claim so I sent him on his way." So he hadn't hurt him further and it sounded like Peter was at least somewhat intact. The act of giving Peter the blanket and water may have actually healed the boy's injuries somewhat. Hopefully I'd find out very soon.

"He went this way?" I asked, pointing towards where the stream entered the small cave.

"I reckon he did," the fellow admitted.

"Then I must go after him," I told the miner, putting action to words.

"Good luck," he said, surprising me. "Boy could use some help." Maybe this fellow wouldn't be too difficult to save once someone found him.

"I'll see that he gets it," I called back over my shoulder but the miner was already panning again and didn't seem to hear me.

Turning my focus ahead, I went back to tracking Peter.

The miner had been a lot nicer than I'd expected. I shouldn't have offered to help him though. I'm still not sure why but offering to help had upset him. I was making better time now that one of my legs was working again. Ahead of me the passage narrowed before opening up into the big cave that faced the woods. I stopped for a moment to rest. The miner had given me a canteen and I drank the last of the water in it. With an effort I stood up on my good leg and hung the strap of it over a bit of rock that jutted out. I didn't know how often the miner came this way, but when he did he'd find it.

Unbidden, a question came to me: why did the other man hate me so much? He'd said things. Lies. And the worst part was, the man knew they were lies. Was he... was he really my father? According to him, he'd killed my mother. And my sister. That must be why they weren't here. They were dead.

I felt a little sad at the thought. But, since I didn't remember them, it didn't bother me too much. Had they been nice? I knew the man had lied when he'd said that my mother had been bad. Part of him knew it too. The part that cried knew it.

For some reason the little girl and the woman from the man's pictures came to mind. I wasn't really sure what they had to do with anything though. Shaking my head, I decided it was time to leave the cave.

I tried hopping out on one leg but the rest of me hurt too bad and I stopped after only two quick hops. However, crawling with one arm and one leg was much easier than crawling with just one arm. It didn't take me long to get out of the cave and into the woods. A little effort later and I was crawling down the trail. Soon it would split and I'd have to decide if I wanted to go to the playground or the house. Probably the house.

Not all the kids in the playground were nice.

Reaching the fork in the trail, I stopped to rest. Some of that water would have been nice.

Much to my surprise, I heard music. A woman was singing a strangely familiar song. I started crawling off the trail when she suddenly rounded the corner and walked into view. She had white hair and carried a covered basket. Her clothing was a bright blue and she wore an almost white sweater over it. Seeing me, she stopped in surprise.

"Why bless my soul! It's young Peter Stowe! I swear, it seems like forever since I last saw you! Look how you've grown! Last time I saw you, you were just knee high to a grasshopper." This strange woman knew me?

"Hmm," she said, stopping in front of me. "You look like you've been playing with the big boys." Kneeling down, she pulled out a handkerchief, dabbed a corner of it with her tongue, and started cleaning off my face. I was too surprised to do anything other than sit there and let her.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" I eventually asked after overcoming my surprise. Looking pleased with herself, she put the now dirty hanky away.

"Why I'm a friend of your mother's," she told me with a smile. "She and I go way back. My name is Lynn Kiesler." That sounded vaguely familiar but I certainly didn't remember her. "You know what?" this white-haired woman asked, "I think I have a picture of me and your mother here somewhere." The older woman started digging around in her pockets and suddenly stopped and looked at me, shaking her head. "Now just where on earth are my manners? You must be half starved, I've never yet met a little boy who wasn't, and here I am carrying a basketful of goodies. I was originally taking them to my husband. I haven't seen him in a while and these are some of his favorites."

She lowered her voice to a near whisper. "But just between you and me, he's been adding a little extra weight in the belly here recently." Using her hands and puffing out her cheeks, she indicated what she meant and I couldn't help but smile. "I don't think it would hurt a bit and I know he wouldn't mind if you ate some of his present." With a flourish, she whipped the cover off the basket. Inside were fruits and chocolate bars and cookies. There were also bottles of water and soda as well as sandwiches and fried chicken. Just looking at it made my stomach rumble.

With a smile the woman sat down across from me. "You know Peter? Walking is hard work, too. I think I'll join you." And with that she took a sandwich off the top as well as one of the sodas.

I pulled out a peanut butter sandwich and stared at it. I couldn't remember when the last time I'd eaten a real sandwich was but I remembered liking them. Hesitantly, I took a small bite. Oh, it tasted good! I ate the rest of it in four bites.

"Soda?" the vaguely familiar woman asked around a mouthful of sandwich. Swallowing quickly, she said, "You'll have to pardon my manners. I'm not around people that often. My husband works quite a ways from here. I'd hoped to meet him on the trail but he seems to be late... as usual." At my worried look, she smiled. "Don't you worry none. Henry's a fine man, wouldn't hurt a fly. A long time ago he used to make games and toys for little children. I'm sure the two of you will get along wonderfully." Still a little concerned, I took a grape soda out of the basket and with an effort opened it. It also tasted really good.

"Oh!" she said excitedly, looking down into the basket, "You've got to try one of the chocolate chip cookies. I baked them myself." Seeing as the sandwich and drink had been so good, I didn't hesitate to take a cookie and bite into it. "Please?" the wrinkled woman asked, "Tell me, what do you think?"

"It's very good!" I mumbled around a mouthful of cookie. And it was. Soft and chocolatey. Yeah. That's exactly what chocolate tasted like. I'd forgotten. Oh my but it was good.

"Oh, I'm so happy to hear you say that," she said with a smile. Snapping her finger, she reached into the pocket of her sweater and pulled out a white feather, so white it was almost glowing. "Look at this! I found this earlier. I hear they bring good luck."

"I found one too!" I replied excited for a moment, but my smile faded away. "But I don't remember where I left it."

"Why that's alright, you can have this one!"

"Really?"

"Oh absolutely! Here, let me tie it into your hair. You'll look like an Indian brave."

"Oh." After thinking about it a moment, I shrugged and took another cookie. "Okay, that could be neat."

Smiling brightly, she began doing something with the feather and my hair. It tingled a little which I thought was a bit strange but the cookie tasted so good I didn't really feel the need to complain about it. A moment later, she leaned back and smiled. "Now that's much better. Oh, you look positively dashing!" I wasn't exactly sure what 'dashing' meant but she said it like it was a good thing so I smiled

"Well, well, well," a frightening and familiar male voice began from nearby. Head jerking to the side and bouncing up to my feet, I found the angry man. But his hands were clean and his eyes had turned orange again. And he was holding a long gun. A gun I recognized as one from the room with all the dead animals in it. "Peter, it seemed I mourned your passing a bit prematurely. Lucky thing I happened to see movement from the high tower window. Using a pair of field glasses, I looked more closely. And who to my surprise happened to be crawling out of that cave but none other than my recently departed son."

"Justin," the woman said, putting herself between me and the man.

He frowned at her and shook his head. "You look familiar but I don't recognize you. Step away from the boy. I'm going to make sure he can't run away any more. He's been a bad boy. A very bad boy and now I'm going to punish him."

I was pretty sure the man didn't hear her mutter under her breath, "Henry dear, I could surely use your help now." More loudly, she asked, "What exactly did the boy do, Justin?" My legs felt good enough that I thought I might have been able to run, except the woman had backed up so that

I was squashed between her and the tree I'd been leaning against. Still facing away from me, with one of her arms, she reached back and took my hand. Leaning to the side, I could just see the right edge of the man.

"He humiliated me!" the man declared loudly. "He ruined the plans I had for my wife. His very existence is a blight! Conceived during one of my wife's lurid affairs as she screwed her way up the corporate ladder. She didn't think I knew, oh but I did. I knew what was really happening when she said she was working late. What was happening when she claimed she was going to other cities for training. Hell yes, I knew. I wasn't stupid. While I was stuck in my dead-end job, she was whoring her way to better and better jobs. And what did I have to show for all my hard work?! An uppity bitch and two whiny, snot-nosed kids that weren't even mine!"

His voice suddenly dropped down low and quiet. "The weekend she came back from an out of town business trip with a bonus... well, that was the last straw. I knew how she'd made the money. And here she brings extra money home for doing God knows what perversions and expected me to be happy about it. But I showed her, didn't I? Hell yes, I did."

"Oh Justin," the woman sighed.

"What?!" he demanded angrily. "You don't believe me, do you? You're taking her side, aren't you!" He stepped to the side a bit and raised the gun. "Well I'll show you just like I showed her!" There came a loud bang and I screamed.

To my surprise I wasn't hurt. The woman gently pulled me around in front of her and put her other arm around my shoulders. And to my further surprise, there was another man here. Like the woman, he too had white hair. Dressed in white robes, he carried a sword and shield. And he now somehow stood between us and the angry man.

"Henry," the woman said, sounding a touch annoyed. "Where have you been?"

"Sandra Lynn Kiesler, can't you stay out of trouble for five minutes?" the white-haired man asked with a fond smile.

She snorted. "As if. Still, it's good to see you old man."

"You too sweetheart. I see you succeeded in your chosen task. Good work that. Exceptional even.

"And to actually answer your question, I was in Purgatory," he explained with a shrug. "I was in the middle of something. Something important. Took me a bit to wrap it up. Ended up having to ask Kerodin to help me fit into the right temporal frame to get here on time... even if it was at the last moment. Still lousy at doing it myself. Time's tricky stuff."

"Who the hell are you?!" the angry man demanded, raising his gun again. There came another boom but the white-haired man simply raised his shield and none of us were harmed.

"I'm Henry Kiesler, you jackass," the robed man replied, poking the tip of his sword into the ground and leaning on it slightly.

"Grandad Kiesler?" the angry man whispered, looking confused.

"Yes, and don't remind me," the old man snapped. "Never thought I'd see the day when one of my grandkids turned out to be such an incredible dumbass. Jealous!" the old man suddenly roared, poking the sword in the angry man's direction causing him to jump. "You were jealous of your wife's success. But instead of celebrating her achievements, you took it as a shortcoming within yourself that you weren't doing as well. I'll share some small portion of that blame with that douche bag father of yours. But not much. You were a grown man. And instead of acting like a man, you acted like a child." He gave me a quick glance before returning his attention back to the angry man. "Hellfire!" he roared again, making me and the angry man both jump, "The boy's acted more like a

man than you. Saying you acted like a child is an insult to selfish, foolish children everywhere!”

“Go away,” the now confused man said, “The boy’s mine.”

“Of course he’s yours you idiot!” the old man barked. “But you knew that. At least a part of you did. Just as you still know it!”

“That’s not what I meant!” the angry man yelled, becoming angry once again. “Go away and leave the boy to me!”

“Damn, you *are* stupid,” the robed fellow said with disgust. “You know that’s not going to happen.”

“Go away!”

“You know?” the old man asked in a conversational tone, “I can’t destroy this overly destructive side of you. It’s against my code of conduct to permanently change someone against their will.” The angry man smiled and did something with the gun. “However,” the robed man continued, “I can wound the hell out of this particular aspect of you.” And with that he lunged forward with the sword. The woman turned me away, holding her hands over my ears and saying loudly, “La la la la,” over and over again. Eventually, she pulled her hands away. I heard a pained groaning sound coming from the other side of her but when I leaned over to look, she stepped in front of me.

“Come Peter,” she said with a smile. “It’s time we left this place.”

“Yes, I want to go back to the house,” I told her.

“That old place?” she asked with a raised eyebrow. “Why would you want to stay there when you could stay at my house? Your grandpa Henry and I have a room all ready for you.”

“You do?” I asked suddenly suspicious. “Why?”

“Why because you’re my great grandson, silly,” she said with a fond smile. “It’s a grandmother’s right to set rooms aside for her children. Why don’t we go see the place and let you decide for yourself?”

“Hey, wait a minute,” I said, beginning to understand that she’d somehow tricked me. “You said you were a friend of my mother’s. Now you’re saying that you’re my grandmother?”

“Great grandmother, actually,” she said with a smile. “Your mother and I got along very well. She’s a smart woman with a lot of drive and a great love in her heart for her children. However, your suspicion is right. I was actually looking for you. It’s been a very long time since I’ve seen you. I missed you. Very much.”

“Oh.”

“Now. Why don’t you come with me and see the room we have set aside for you? Give you a chance to get to know Henry and myself better? I mean, how often do you get a chance to meet your great grandparents?”

“Well, I suppose it would be okay to check it out,” I replied a bit warily.

“Wonderful!” she declared with a bright smile that made me feel better for some reason. “Why don’t we go that way now? If you don’t mind, I’d like to stop along the way and introduce you to a friend of mine. Her name is Rose and she’s just going to love meeting you.”

As we walked down the path, away from the house I suddenly felt happy. And realized just as suddenly that I hadn’t felt this way in a very, very long time.

Panting for breath, the young girl leaned against a tree for support. They were still behind

her. She was suddenly sure of this most unfortunate fact. Her hopes of losing them in the thick trees had long past faded to a most faint and desperately tenuous hope. Though her legs burned, she ran forward again. Suddenly, through a break in the trees, she saw the house. It was huge, and old, and very run down. Maybe.... She turned and looked back for signs of her pursuers and saw a distant flicker of motion between the trees. New fright lent strength to her aching legs and she ran for the house.

As she came close, one of the front doors opened. If she couldn't lose them in the woods, maybe she could hide in there....