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*Our language has wisely sensed the two sides of being alone. It has created the word loneliness to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word solitude to express the glory of being alone.*

— Paul Tillich

**Monica Davis**  
**Christopher J. Levinson**

**"It's time, Ms. Davis," a distant voice said.** "Can you hear me? It's time to come back."

Monica Davis drifted on a wave of agony. The haze of drugs and pain made focusing on her surroundings difficult. But pain had become her life and even like this, she knew what she was meant to do. Concentrating, she let her mind slip away. For a timeless moment she was in another place, a place where she felt truly free.

Then abruptly Monica was sitting in a chair under a window. The haze was lifted from her senses. She was in a hospital room. A woman lay on a bed, drips and screens around her. Her husband stood before her.

Monica recognised the woman's face; for days it had been Monica's own while she was in the woman's body, enduring her pain. Renee Parker looked very pale and Monica knew what she must have been feeling. She didn't pity her for it.

Renee blinked. "I'm me again," she said softly. "Back to the old life, back to being... *me*."

"How do you feel?" her husband, Stephen, asked.

"Like I was just run over," Renee said.

"The reintegration?"

"Yes. Nothing can ready a person for that."

"It's like being knocked down," Monica agreed. "You were hit with the pain and didn't know what to expect. It's overwhelming now, but it gets better after the shock wears off."

"Is it always like that?" Stephen asked.

"With major surgery, certainly, but that first experience shocks everyone," Monica said.

"The doctors told me... you... whatever... that the first stage of recovery will be a few weeks," Renee said.

Monica nodded. "Just take it a day at a time. Your body's undergone an ordeal. You can't expect too much of it."

"I won't."

Something didn't feel right inside her. Monica winced, hunching over with a sharp pain in her left side. Her right leg felt tender as well. Monica was meticulous with her own form; she only felt alive when in tune with her body. She hadn't been like this before.

Monica looked at them. "What did you do to my body?"

Stephen shrugged. "We lived."

"You *hurt* me. It feels like I have cracked ribs and God knows what else. This is my *life*. You're just playing with it."

"No. We *paid* for you, Ms. Davis," Renee said. "Of course we'd want to explore the opportunity."

"It's immoral," Monica said. "You signed a contract. You can't just hurt a person knowing you won't have to live with it. It's abuse."

"It's called living," Renee replied coldly. "And I'm surprised. I thought you were supposed to *live* for pain. I suppose you're like the rest of us after all."

Monica rose. "Enjoy your recovery," she snapped, and left them, the ache she wasn't meant to have echoing with every step.

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**The truth was, though sometimes she might try to hide it,** Monica Davis was very different to other people. She had been different ever since she was a little girl. She was a genetic aberration, a freak with an ability to exchange minds with a person; literally, to swap bodies.

Monica swapped by reaching out with her thoughts and touching another mind; she could initiate swaps with people even if they weren't like her. When she was young it had even been fun. She had swapped with all her friends, playing games in different bodies, helping each other during tests without the teacher knowing. When Monica was older she learnt to use the ability intimately, swapping with a partner as they made love, learning to excite each other in different ways and different forms.

But most importantly, it was how she lived. There were precious few people like Monica in the world and her abilities proved invaluable. Imagine what her abilities might mean for a person afraid of a root canal, a CEO too important to get the flu, someone needing major surgery... For a substantial fee she traded places with them; Monica made her living by enduring their pain.

They weren't *all* painful experiences. There were times when writers and artists used her services too — they might be caught in a rush of inspiration but their bodies needed rest, so she slept for them and in her body they worked through the night. But pain had come to dominate her existence. She had felt it so much she understood it, and the desperation of the people who used her.

Taking on different personas was how she survived, but Monica didn't take careless risks. Like any minority group, swappers were hated by many; so she only advertised in safe places. And she made people sign contracts; with the legality of swapping still a grey area, she had to protect herself.

The danger that swapping represented was very real. When she swapped with a person she didn't just experience their pains, she took on their entire identity. These people were often disabled, and for a time she allowed them the use of her body while she took care of their own. She might swap with a blind man who wanted to see the beauty of the world for a few hours; or with an obese woman who in an instant became beautiful and thin. It was so tempting for them to leave her stranded, disappearing with a new life...

Few ever tried it because Monica protected herself with the contracts. But the case of Renee Parker had proved an exception.

A few months earlier doctors had discovered cancer spreading rapidly through Renee and were forced to schedule an operation. Monica had swapped with Renee to endure the operation and the first days of recovery, taking her pain, and during that time Renee had been in Monica's

body. Renee would have been swept away in this other life, making love to her husband Stephen and experiencing life with him. The opportunity would've enticed her. She had come close to death, and still faced it if they didn't get all of the cancer... the thought had made Renee reckless, desperate to feel alive. She could have done anything in Monica's body, and it had resulted in the injuries Monica now felt. When she was forced to swap back with Monica, she would have felt a sense of dread all over again, the threat of death. It would have hurt Renee anew.

Monica understood why Renee was hostile towards her — she reminded Renee of all she had lost. Truthfully most people were antagonistic after reintegration. But it still didn't excuse what Renee had done. Even though the signed contract prohibited her from taking dangerous risks in Monica's form, she'd still taken them, not once considering what it would mean for Monica when she had to return to her own body — how long it might take her to heal. Both Renee and Stephen (who'd done nothing though knowing what the contract stated) were selfish and had abused her as surely as if they had struck her themselves. If not for the unwanted attention it would bring, Monica would consider pressing charges. But a part of it was her fault also. She should have anticipated this.

Now, minutes after leaving them, she found herself out on the city streets, holding her side and limping her way home. Darkness was descending and the city always seemed to embrace the setting sun. Tall buildings cast gruesome shadows; the streets were dirty and the people around her were all one and the same, lost souls. These were the people she lived off, people whose pain she understood — people she believed she wasn't like in any way.

Suddenly her leg gave way and she stumbled. She steadied herself against a shopfront, but couldn't walk any farther. She rested for a long moment, bitter, tired, and hurting.

"You don't look well, Monica," a familiar voice said.

She turned to see a man nearby. He was in his early thirties, with unkempt dark hair and pale blue eyes. He wore a black shirt and trousers, leather jacket and boots; the cloth of the Artistry. She knew Daniel Ryan through her contacts here, but not particularly well; like her he combed the neighbourhood, trying to help people. She knew he meant her no harm.

"I don't exactly feel well either," she said.

"From swapping?" Daniel queried.

She nodded. "A stupid mistake. I should've checked them out more. Now I have to live with it."

"Being a little harsh, aren't you? Sometimes things just happen, Monica. You can't protect yourself all the time."

"I know. But if I do nothing I'll only be hurt anyway."

"It's more than that," the Life Artist said quietly. "And deep down I think you know it too. You're drawn to pain."

"Perhaps I am, in some ways. But you hardly know me, Daniel. Do you think you should be passing judgement on me?"

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to seem that way. I just see the pain in you, Monica, I *feel* it, and I'm just sorry that you can't. Here. Let me help you home."

"Thank you. And I do know what you mean. It's just... hard for me."

Daniel nodded and took her arm gingerly, supporting her as they walked away.

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**In Monica's home Daniel tended to her wounds as she lay on her bed**, carefully wrapping bandages around her side. Her shirt was rolled up but covered her modestly. She watched him as he worked. He showed little emotion, concentrating as his hands passed around her.

Daniel Ryan was never what she expected him to be. As a Life Artist he studied a person to understand their pain, afterwards recreating their very essence in a portrait. Many people thought Life Artists were figures to be feared and avoided. Monica had had enough contact with Daniel in the past to know he didn't deserve that; if anything it made him very lonely.

"I'm sorry I never got to know you better," Monica said as he finished. "We spend so much time walking these streets, but cross paths only every now and then. I think we have a lot in common."

"We probably do," he agreed. "But I have been watching you, helping where I can. I know you better than you might give me credit."

"So it wasn't a coincidence you were there when I needed you."

"Not entirely."

"Why are you so kind to me? I don't deserve it," she said softly.

"You deserve it more than many others," Daniel replied. "I want to help you. I guess I want to understand you."

Monica pulled her shirt down and pushed herself to her feet. Daniel helped her over to the lounge then rested against the arm of a chair.

"What does it feel like to drift?" Daniel asked.

"Like being... free," Monica said after a moment. "Existing without limitations, without fear. Just free."

"And the feeling of being inside someone?"

"It can be strange, sometimes. Like not being me. I can look in a mirror and know it's me, but it's not my face, not who I am. But I *feel* the same if I'm in a man's body, or a woman's. I feel like... me. That's the only way I can put it. Perhaps a soul doesn't have a single form." She sighed, shaking her head. "This is how I live, Daniel. It's all I know."

"It doesn't have to be. I'd like to show you something else," he said. "Tomorrow, if you're strong enough."

Monica looked at him for a long moment before finally nodding. "All right."

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**The next day Daniel took her** to an apartment building a few streets from where she lived.

At first she thought this was Daniel's home. But when she was inside, having slowly and painfully climbed the stairs, she realised she was wrong. This was where he kept his portraits. There was little furniture, creating an impersonal feeling. Some of his works were scattered on the floor, a few displayed on the walls. Sole imagery filled their screens, single portraits of people, of *life*; in contrast to the emptiness, they created a very intimate feeling.

This was a collection of all the people he had ever touched.

Monica Davis  
Christopher J. Levinson

Monica stepped through the room carefully. First she was drawn to a portrait of a man addicted to drugs. His hand was closed around a syringe, a vial of heroin lying discarded on the floor. There was a haunted look in his eyes, as if the addiction had already destroyed his soul. A woman stood behind him, watching with a young girl holding her hand. A single tear ran down the woman's face. The pain the man had caused his family was palpable, the portrait telling the human price of addiction. In another, a woman walked through the city at night, her face turned to the ground in sorrow. Rain fell around her and the faint city lights gave the scene a desperate look. Her outstretched fingers had dropped a small gold cross, letting it fall to the ground. This was a woman who had lost her faith and was uncertain not just of the world, but of who she was.

There were a dozen more portraits; all were infused with humanity, with a sense of life and pain. This was what Life Artists did, touching lives to understand them. But for Monica any of these portraits could be of her.

She was like them, yet she'd always thought she was alone.

"I want to open a gallery here, one day," Daniel said. "So all people can see this, feel it. So they can understand what it's like to live when you have nothing."

"There's a lot people can learn here," Monica observed.

"People don't understand, we're not just artists, we're teachers of life as well," Daniel said.

"Do other Life Artists have galleries?" she asked.

"Very few," he said. "They're afraid of showing their portraits, afraid of becoming targets of hatred and fear."

"You're not?"

"Some things are more important than that," he replied.

"I don't fear you," she said quietly.

"Maybe when this opens, others won't either." Daniel studied her. "I brought you here because you think you suffer alone. But you're not alone, Monica. There are so many people like you."

Monica nodded. "I know," she said softly.

"I see your pain. You don't have to live this way."

"It's who I am...," she said, voice trailing away.

"But it doesn't have to be," Daniel said. "Come and help me here, with the gallery. Maybe I can help you heal."

"I don't know what I want," she said, glancing away.

"Just think about it for a moment, okay?" he said. "You have so much to lose otherwise."

Daniel started to hang another portrait on one of the walls; in time he would display them all. Monica looked around at all of his works again. She felt the connection with them, with all the souls and lives captured around her. She was so much more like them than she had ever known.

She made her decision. "Hold on," Monica said, limping over to join him. "I'll help you with that."