

*You and I* by Ava Jo

You find yourself floating amid a swirl of colors. Streams of red, blue and yellow flow playfully between your fingers, overlapping in whorls of purple, green and orange. You watch the light for a moment. Then you flex the muscles in your hand, taking delight in the way the beams feels almost solid on your palms.

When you tire of that, you take a look around. There is nothing besides the light, which stretches onward into oblivion. You've lost all sense of direction, but there is a deep sense of peace resting within you.

You feel a certain pull in your chest. It's a powerful sensation, like a combination of a deep, content love and a full stomach. It makes you stare down at yourself.

That's when you realize you aren't *you*. You are part of the light, too, and the edges of your body are blurred and fractured. You don't like that, so you imagine yourself sharp and whole, willing the light into a more solid form.

Surprisingly, it works. Your appendages slowly come into focus, and the short legs that have made you feel insecure next to the taller girls at school now give you comfort here among the rushing light. You brush your shoulder-length, dark hair out of your face, blinking for the first time in earnest.

You gain confidence, urging streams of color together. First you create an uneven circle, then a bowl-like shape, followed by an object that resembles a crooked lamp. After a while, you start to get better. You manage to create a small bird of prey. You concentrate hard, so hard you imagine your head starts to ache.

The bird stretches its wings and takes flight.

With each creation, you feel a burst of joy. You are surrounded by color and by happiness, by the warm feeling of knowing you are loved. You still don't know where you are, but you don't mind.

That's when you see me.

At first I'm just another swirl of light, a pretty flow of orange and yellow. Then my light curls into a form you can recognize. You visibly flinch back like you've seen a ghost, a hysteric on your face as you try to tell yourself that I'll be gone in a moment. But deep down, you know that this is my domain, not yours.

I can see you take in the details. You first notice I'm wearing a crown of daisies, same as when I left. My dress is the beautiful color of a blossoming orange rose, and my feet are bare. My hair is striking is wild, descending to my shoulders in a ruffled mess, and I've put on a playful smile. Your bird disintegrates back into soft red light. I hold out a hand. You're not sure if you should take it. Your hand hesitates, hovering uneasily at your chest level.

You know you've gotten stronger since I disappeared and left you all alone with your crushing loss. But the thought of grasping my warm hand and feeling my confident grip again breaks a chink in the protective wall you've built up over the years.

I drift closer, lessening my connection to your thoughts in order to make you feel safer. You try to back away, but you still haven't mastered the light enough to move well. I sigh and will the colors into a solid floor beneath us. Walls come into existence; two plush chairs form out of a bright teal light.

You've stumbled to the corner. You look confused, but you've also shaped your eyebrows into a determined expression, maybe from the comfort that comes from standing on solid ground. You've managed to reshape your little bird, and it sits on your shoulder, staring at me with a tilted head. I call it forward, but it closes its wings and turns its head.

Curious. That's never happened before. Everything in this realm is supposed to answer to me, and me alone. It's almost like you've given the bird a will of its own.

*Sit down*, I finally say, after a moment of silent contemplation. The sound of my voice reverberates through your head, and you lose your balance. You stare at me as if I've done something wrong.

*Come sit*, I urge, *and I'll explain everything*. This time the sensation of my voice in your mind doesn't visibly shock you as much, but I can tell you're still unnerved by the way you're biting your lip and twirling a strand of your hair with one of your fingers.

You take tiny, shuffling steps over to the teal armchairs, and sit down in one. I take the other. I can see your face scrunched in concentration, trying to convey your thoughts to me. I make it easy for you by opening up a sound pocket.

You stare in wonder as the light flows up and over the protective dome. I smile. Your fascination is my fascination.

I can tell you haven't noticed the noise since you arrived. But once it's gone, you can recall the loud, rumbling sound of the light. The unpredictable, swooping whooshes and rushes that had naturally blended into the background. Now all is silent.

"Do you remember me?" I ask. I know you do, but I need you to acknowledge it yourself.

"Yes," you say.

"What do you remember?"

"I remember you appearing in the fields the day after..."

"After?" I prompt gently.

A sudden steely glint fills your eyes, and the corners of your mouth twist downward. "You know what happened! You're just making me relive it!"

"You need to," I say calmly. "The only reason you're here is because you haven't recovered. Not from my disappearance, and not from your little brother's death."

You gasp as if I've punched a hole through you. Perhaps I have, in a sense. "Don't!" you yell. "I don't want to talk about him!"

"I know the wound still feels fresh. You will heal in time. But I am here to assure you I didn't leave because of you."

You lower your head. The bird chirps indignantly. "How did you know I was worried about that?" you ask, avoiding the subject of your brother. I make a note to bring it up later.

"I can sense your emotions," I say. "As well as your need for an explanation."

"So that day... Why *did* you leave?"

"I had to." My eyes cloud, and I reach a hand toward you. I needed to fix the damage I've done... I need you to feel that I'm here now, and that none of this is your fault.

"But why?" you say. "Face it, it *was* because of me. I said hurtful things the day before, and you looked upset, and then you were gone."

You wiggle away from my hand, pushing yourself further into the chair. “That wasn’t the reason,” I repeat. “It was only natural, what you said. I wasn’t sensitive enough to your grief. I’m sorry for that. It’s hard to feel other’s pain when you’re incapable of feeling the emotion yourself—something that drastically impairs my ability to do my job.”

“Don’t apologize to me!” you shout. “You were perfect. You were my best friend.” The last words were hardly a whisper. I barely managed to catch them before they were gone forever.

It’s worse than I thought.

“But it is my fault. I let you believe I could stay. I couldn’t. This is my job. I was needed elsewhere.”

The words sink in. Job. Needed. *Elsewhere*.

Your voice is very small when you ask your next question. “You didn’t... choose to visit me?”

I sigh. “It’s complicated. On one hand, I had to. On the other, I wanted to. You needed my help much more than the others.”

This is the moment where something clicks. When you finally realize the truth: that you’re not the only one. You can’t say anything. Words fail you. I know that I can’t trust myself to open my mouth either. So I close my eyes and change.

A moment later I’m wearing a navy blue dress. My now-black hair is up in a bun, and my skin is dark. I metamorphose again. I’m wearing a white top and a green skirt, and my loose brown hair is down to my shoulders. Again and again my appearance alters, until it’s just an ever-flickering motion.

You shy away. The teal armchair dissolves into light that ricochets off the sound bubble with a noise like thunder. Somehow you manage to keep the bird cozied up against your neck in solid form.

The changes come even faster. You don’t want to look, but your eyes are drawn to me. You hunch down into the navy carpet, eyes burning. Your bottom lip begins to tremble. “Stop it!” you finally cry.

My appearance settles on a short, pretty brunette wearing a blouse and long pants. “Why?”

“Because I get it now,” you say. “I’m not special. I didn’t even know you as *you!*”

“There is no real me. I change faster than your seasons.”

You don’t look reassured. “You were there for all of them, too, when they lost someone...”

“Yes, I was.” I step closer, and you finally look up at me. Your eyes are prickled with tears. “I was because it’s my job. It’s the purpose that binds me and all my forms into one. It’s the purpose that makes this place possible.”

“I know,” you whisper, “but it’s hard not to be selfish sometimes.”

I bend down to take your hand. “If it helps,” I say, pulling you to your feet, “you were my favorite.”

You straighten out your worn blue overalls, avoiding my gaze. I’ve purposefully picked a form that lets me look at you eye to eye, but it’s no good if I can’t even get you to trust me again.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“No,” you respond, still stubbornly looking away. “I still wish you’d told me you were leaving.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

You pull your arms tightly around yourself as you realize I’m talking about your brother, rocking slightly on your heels. “I—” you say, then pause. Your eyebrows scrunch up. “I’m not sure. I feel mad... at you. And betrayed... also by you. But not sad.”

“Good,” I say encouragingly. “You’re moving on.”

“No!” you yell, and there’s a fire in your eyes as you slam your fist into the ground. Your bird takes flight and circles around the sound pocket, chirping. “It’s not good! How bad is a big sister who can’t even feel grief for her own brother?”

I take a step closer. You don’t flinch away, don’t react at all. Your gaze is still cast on the ground. “You are mourning,” I say. “Your anger is a kind of grief in itself.”

You snort, picking at your white sleeves. “Yeah, right.”

I cross my arms sternly. “Listen to me. You miss him, right?”

“Well, duh,” you say. “And he was only seven...” the rest of your sentence trails off into silence.

“You can’t control sickness. His death wasn’t your fault.”

You shrug. My heart lightens—maybe I’m getting closer.

“Please don’t be afraid of moving on,” I told you. “That’s why I came to you. To help you move on. I left because I thought you had, and I was proud of you for that.”

With that you glance up and meet my eyes. On your face is a slight smile. “Okay. But when I go back, you’ll miss me, right?” you tease.

“Well, duh,” I say in imitation of you.

You finally, *finally* laugh, and my whole world brightens. The pocket of silence bursts, and we’re back to floating in the swirling void.

*I’ll have to send you back now, I tell you. We won’t see each other again. Not in this life. But I want you to know I’m proud of you. I always will be. So move on with your life. Be someone special.*

*Because I’ll love you no matter what.*

You wake up in your bed. I’m watching you, but it’s hard. It’s like trying to focus a blurry telescope.

Nevertheless, I watch as you get up and stretch. Your head is tilted as you pause to think, but your eyes are calm and shining. You open the window, drawing in the sight of the peaceful farmland, and my eyes widen.

A little red bird flutters in and lands on your shoulder. It’s wearing a string of daisies around its neck.

I tear my eyes off you with a smile. I know now is finally the time.

My struggling connection blinks out. The sounds of rushing colors return, and I let myself float away with the warmth. I won't be able to find you again. But that's alright. I feel an inner peace that I haven't felt in a long time. The sensation of knowing I've healed somebody, that everything will be okay. The sensation of knowing that *you* will be okay.

I give in completely, dissolving my form into a stream of blue and green light that dives playfully into the chaos.

It's time to wait for the next one.