

## The Dance of Choice

### First Steps

Alicia walked along the cracked concrete lining the canal, afternoon sun shards bright and sharp across the water flowing through it. She could see the enclosure up ahead, a dusty gray structure poking up above the canal's edge, enshrouding the recessed metal door that led who knew where. Maybe it led into the underbelly of this awful city. Maybe to somewhere worse. Or better.

She didn't know, and didn't care. It was always locked, anyway, and she just needed the shade it provided, and the privacy. She had her kit, she had the baggie, and today...was the day.

Her mind wouldn't let her explore what she'd done to obtain the bag, the key to whatever came after. Every time her mind wandered backward in memorial time, it met a slick ramp that slid her back into the now.

That was ultimately a mercy, she thought. Not much of that going around, back then *or* now.

She reached the little bunker that housed the rusty door, and slipped into the shadowed section in front of it. Sitting down with her back against the oxidized metal, she thought,

*No sense putting it off. It was time to get to the end of her performance.*

She prepped the hit. It'd always been like a dance recital to her. The unzip, and the extraction of the tools were the moments before going out onto the stage, the waiting before being evaluated.

The spoon, the lighter, and the pull into the needle were the first orchestrated footfalls toward center stage.

*Adagio.*

Almost everyone could get this right, even as parents and coaches watched. She'd never missed a step in all of them, at least at this portion.

Then came the mechanics of finding the vein.

*Port de bras.*

It was harder, especially now, but she had never failed so far, past or present in either thing.

Then, the needle was in, and she watched the little crimson rose bloom inside it.

*Grand jeté.*

Then, of course, there was the push.

A few moments passed, and that was where she lost interest in metaphor, dance, or life. Things that describe other things without *being* those things can only go so far.

As euphoria engulfed her, she looked out across the canal at the city beyond. A line of palm trees marched along the other side of the canal and far behind them, ridiculously tall buildings tried unsuccessfully to poke holes in the sky.

Alicia decided to scoot her way out of the shadows to the edge of the canal, using only her heels and leg strength. Verticality was not something she aspired to right now.

The sun felt good. Sliding her ass along the graveled fringe to the edge of the canal felt good. Everything felt good. She wondered whether she'd collapse forward, and drown in the canal, or flop backward on the fringe and bake in the sun, dead either way.

Even as her senses deserted her and the death-shot slowed her heart, she did register a few things before the darkness took her, like a montage in a movie.

There was the screech of rusted metal turning against itself, with a clunking sound midway between.

An older, gray-haired woman hovered over her, and Alicia felt herself being dragged out of the light.

A man who looked remarkably like her ex-boyfriend's grandfather pressed a moistened cloth against her lips, drips of what tasted like the smell of camphor falling onto her tongue. Above, she could see a tree canopy, with sun shining dimly down through it.

The last was a young, dark-haired girl, staring down at her and patting her cheek.

Then it was all black.

#### Revised Choreography

She awoke sometime later, laid out on a hard pallet, loose-weave blankets both below her as well as on top.

The room was small, with stucco walls and a single window below which was an old wooden table and one chair. Through the window she could see tall trees casting shadows and giving a green tinge to the light that made its way inside. There was also a rough-hewn door on the opposite wall.

She felt terrible, but certainly not the worst she'd ever felt. There had been times when she'd not been able to score for multiple days at a time. This wasn't like that. That had felt like death without the surcease.

This was like a mild case of the flu, with joint and muscle pain, a little nausea, and she thought she might need to hit the bathroom pretty soon. It made her think she hadn't been out that long. She sat up with some difficulty, both regretting the decision and also glad that she could, as her gut began to protest in earnest. The question to answer now beyond if she'd actually make it to the toilet was why she was here at all. She was supposed to be dead. That had been the whole point.

She got unsteadily to her feet, and went to the door. She opened it, and was surprised to see that it opened to the outside.

Eight other small buildings with thatched roofs and earthen walls ringed a small glade, surrounded by the immense trees she'd seen through the window. There was a fire-pit in the middle, and a dirt circle around it with short tree-trunk rounds upended as seats in the same number as the structures.

She cast about, looking for what she needed and that need becoming more urgent by the second. Between two of the huts to her right, she saw a small wooden enclosure that screamed "outhouse". It became the only thing in the world that mattered.

She made it by the thinnest of margins, ripping the door open and planting herself. As she took care of that, her nausea spiked. She wondered if the indignity would double, but then her stomach settled.

When she emerged, she saw the gray-haired woman from her post death-shot montage walking towards her from the open door of a hut directly across from her. They met near the fire-pit, and the woman greeted her.

"Hello, child."

Alicia mentally cycled a number of questions before getting to the one that she really wanted the answer to.

“Why?”

The woman stood on one side of the fire-pit, and Alicia the other. She did take a moment to consider her answer before she spoke. Her gray hair danced slightly in a brief breeze. She didn’t smile, just looked sad.

“Because you mean something. ‘You are fearfully and wonderfully made’, I think is the quote. And you’ve lost track of that.”

“No, I don’t. I’m not.” Alicia felt the anger kindle within her. It was never far away. It didn’t matter that she felt like shit right now. This was therapist or pastor self-worth exhortation. She’d heard it all before, and it meant nothing.

The woman didn’t react, just looked at her. But before Alicia could reiterate her question, which was her reflex reaction, a memory surfaced from deep inside. It came unbidden and unwelcomed, a relic of another time and another her.

*She had triumphed at that particular recital. Her footwork and bodywork had been flawless, and the judges had all said so. Both of her parents had attended, which had been akin to a multi-planetary alignment, given how much they hated each other. She could see them at the end, during the applause, sitting together in the audience with proud faces. The animosity between them was lost in the glow of her performance, and she had foolishly begun to hope that her success would bridge the gap between them. It had been a misplaced hope, and she should have known.*

The memory just made her angrier, and beyond her confusion about where she was now, she could only focus on the single query.

“Why?”

The woman looked down at the dirt before looking back up at her. She seemed more resolute this time.

“You have a choice to make. We’ve done what we can do to make getting clean as easy as possible. You’ve been asleep for almost two days. You know what you *should* feel like, but you don’t, do you?”

But even as the symptoms fade, you know what it demands. Clean doesn’t mean free.”

The woman put up an index finger, and rotated her hand in a circular gesture, obviously referencing the other structures surrounding them.

“There are people here who can help. But, if you want out, you want out. If you want to get back to it, I can show you that way, too. It’s up to you. We wanted to give you this chance.”

Alicia teetered. Even as the withdrawal symptoms lessened minute bit by minute bit, the overarching specter of the *want* started to increase. In the end, it was exhaustion that helped her make the first choice. She knew there’d be many more, but this was what she could do right now.

“I think I’m going to go lie down again, if that’s alright.”

The woman smiled, and Alicia thought it was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud.

“I think that is *wonderful* idea.”

