

Ch. 2

Wishpool

They got up together, and walked hand-in-hand the short length of the hatch-way hall. They passed into the atrium and both of them froze. The changes evident even in the scant light of the window above demanded it. He felt his breath depart in shock. The moment elongated as they surveyed the huge change to this previously already-strange place.

She spoke first, her voice a whisper.

"Oh, my god."

All he could do was ask the question he already knew the answer to. Nothing in front of him offered any explanation.

"It wasn't like this, right? When you dragged me out?"

Her answer was cursory, and distracted.

"Don't be stupid."

The space before them was the same shape, and the landmarks were all in the same positions as before, but everything was...what? How to describe it was the issue here, but then Sophia articulated it in three words.

"It's been shattered."

That was better than anything he had.

The walls, the black doors, the glass portals, even the stairs and upper walkways were veined with deep fissures that indeed looked like shattered glass. He was reminded in the

moment of the spider-webbed window in their hotel room in that cold other world where they'd come to know each other.

But these fissures were deep, and wider, and seemed to be backlit in an off-white light that seemed more like a placeholder than a glow, like an illustration of the nothingness behind the things you could see.

The window up above was intact, and he could see a sliver of moon through it. It was the only thing from before that was, however, and it made the one new thing that much more surreal.

Sophia once again voiced it first.

"That reminds me of something. What is it?"

In the center of the atrium floor, there was a pool.

It was ringed by low, flat stones that seemed to have grown from the concrete floor. Its surface was black, save for the reflection of the moon, and the few stars visible in the night sky through the window above. It was round, and looked about six feet in diameter. It was impossible to tell its depth in the light available. He spoke the first words that came to mind.

"It's like that Narnia book."

He could feel her attention shift to him from it, but he couldn't do the same. He couldn't look away from it. It shouldn't have surprised him that they'd reached the same conclusion, given all their time together, but it still did as she answered.

"Yeah. That's it.

That's the way forward, right? And if we stay here, we'll be stuck, maybe."

It was in his mind to disagree, to assert that they couldn't know that, but the idea died before it reached his lips, because he somehow knew for a certainty that it was true. He could already feel a deep feeling of lassitude beginning to disconnect him from his desire to act, and knew that if he waited, it would prevail. It occurred to him then that despite the observed change here, this was how this place operated. It had proved that it would remake a part of itself to advance its own agenda. Was this any different? It made its will known, and expected compliance.

And the pool called. He could feel it. He didn't remember the story that clearly, but he seemed to remember that there had been multiple pools in it, but that didn't diminish the similarity in his mind at all, and he imagined that it was the same for Sophia.

He'd do it just for that, though he knew that was the hook this place had thrown out to him, and probably her, too, though maybe she'd been too busy dying to hear the siren call.

He knew *that* had been what it was. He'd heard it every day. The pennies had been receptors, and he knew now in the moment

that it had been its own infection, more benign than hers, maybe, but no less effective.

He was brought back to neutrality for a few moments by this realization. He teetered there, contemplating what turning away from this would mean to them. He could see the going back, the returning, and all that that held for them.

He remembered stumbling back out into the sunlight of their world together as they left the boat. He remembered the cloud of his addiction settling down about him in the same exact way the asshole demon had delivered it as the hatch clanged shut behind them. He remembered the destitution that he'd felt as it happened, and he remembered the long, long crawl together to his sobriety.

She had been masterful. She'd known when to pull back, when to press in, when to guilt, when to build up, etc. In this place now, he wondered briefly whether it was her own schematic, or something external.

He supposed it didn't really matter. It had all come to the same result. He'd finally achieved the thing that the boat had gifted him in a moment. He was clean again, and had stayed clean, though it had taken him the better part of a year to get anywhere close to it.

He saw it, the past struggle and the present implication knit together in an undeniable result.

If they returned to the world they knew, the poison in her would finish its course like the flaw in him would have when they'd returned, if not for their time together in this place, and her help in refuting it. It waited for her, pacing back and forth, her beast like all beasts the same.

In the end, it wasn't really a choice. He didn't have to decide, because they both knew the score, already.

He stepped up onto one of the stones ringing the pool, and pulled her along.

"Make a wish."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Her answer wasn't long in coming.

"Ok. Done."

He leapt into the pool, pulling her with him.