

Ch. 3

Goodbye, yellow brick road

The shock of the water never fully realized itself, because it was instantly replaced by a sense of falling, and all light departed once they passed the plane of the pool's surface. There was no sense of being immersed, at least at first. He held tight to her hand as they fell silently through black nothingness, the feeling of falling at odds with the silence. No air rushed past to indicate their progress, but the sensation was undeniable. He thought to speak, to reassure her during their dark descending, but he couldn't. His mouth opened, and his vocal cords made the necessary motions, but no sounds came. It was if the air in his lungs that would articulate the words wasn't air, but some restrictive fluid, though he felt no deprivation or pressure.

The black around them started to color, a deep blue beginning to blush slowly alight far below them, only emphasizing the feeling of descent. It grew and lightened quickly, lending an alarming sense of speed to their fall. He sent the neural command to the appropriate muscles to look downward, but couldn't manage that either. He could feel Sophia's grip on his hand, and a thought pushed into his mind from outside. There was no way he could know it was hers, but he knew it was just the same. There were only two words.

"Breathe in."

He did, and then they were fully immersed. The blue flashed to a deep aqua color in the same instant, and he was floating in an inverted under-water panorama. He trapped the breath he'd taken in his chest despite his surprise, holding it against the expulsion demanded by the same.

Above him, upside-down coral reefs and a white sand roof marched away in an upward arc into the fluidic blue distance, full of flitting, colorful fish and green under-sea plants reaching down towards the bright, tremulous light pulsing below his feet.

He felt Sophia tug at his hand, and felt himself begin to rotate, even as he noticed the bubbles around him.

They were headed south toward his feet, and he intuited that they had been called into existence by their abrupt introduction into this place, even as the rest of it became clear. He used his free hand to help him re-orient himself as he let go of her hand, and they both struck for the surface as oxygen deprivation began to assert itself.

They had been inserted here at least twenty feet below the surface, and the need for air grew exponentially even as they neared the boundary between it and themselves.

They broke the surface at almost the same time, with twin expulsions of air misting the residual water around their mouths

outward, and their subsequent intake of breath was nearly in tandem.

Then they were treading water, and got their first look at where they were.

The sea's surface stretched almost unbroken from horizon to horizon, the immensity of that flat line between ocean blue and blue sky lending an inordinate weight to the two things that interrupted it. One was near, solid and substantial, and the other was a hint of green on the horizon, almost a mirage.

The near thing was only thirty yards away, and the slow movement of the water's surface lent a disconnected, floating quality to it. A whitish square of stone fringe poked its head above the lazy swirls of water lapping slowly at its edges, and upon it sat a structure that would have been at home anywhere along the coast of the Adriatic or the Mediterranean. A light-colored stacked-stone base pushed upward about fifteen feet, punctuated only by a jutting set of stone stairs ascending from underneath the surface of the water to a dark-mouthed archway in its center mid-way up. Up above, verdant green shot through with brilliant points of color softened the top edge, and in the middle a building with a high, red-tile roof presented one side of itself as it pushed further up into the azure sky.

They both struck for the base of the stairway, swimming without any urgency. Sophia reached it before he did, climbing

onto the first step above the water-line. She then turned to grasp his hand, helping him upright, her hospital gown plastered to her slight frame. They then stood together, looking up at the building above for a while without speaking, as water drained downward from their clothing. It returned to the blue stretching away, across the stone of the step they stood upon, save that pooling in his shoes.

She spoke first, and he was reminded at once that she usually did, and that it was one of the things that he loved about her the most. She was always ahead of him, and it had never bothered him in the least, even if it was a question, like now. It had always been like this for him in their time together. Sophia had always been a reality, where Rachael had been more of a conditional influence. He was ashamed about the truth of that, but knew that it was nothing he could ever escape.

"Thoughts?"

"We're not in Kansas anymore."

Her response was reflexive, but distracted yet again.

"Constructive and/or relevant thoughts?"

He put his arm around her waist, and kissed her upturned forehead, enjoying the smell of sea salt, and that shampoo she always used. He'd made sure the nurses that bathed her had used

it too. Then he looked back up at the structure waiting for them.

"I think it's time to go see the man behind the curtain, don't you?"