

Ch. 4

The sixth station

She nodded as he let go of her, and she grasped his hand, twining her fingers into his as she turned and pulled him into motion up the stone steps. And why wouldn't she, he thought. She'd been bed-ridden for the last eight and a half months. Unrestricted motion must be an imperative for her right now.

He thought about the surrealism of this place, and found that it paled in comparison to the fact that he was now walking next to his wife. The feel of her firm grip, and the ease with which she moved were an utter contradiction to the last three years of their life together.

It had been eight years and change since they had left the madness behind, and started a new life together.

It had been a rough start, as his addiction had shanghied the starring role, asserting itself with immediacy as well as showing a familiar, abiding reluctance to step aside as time passed.

He had fully expected her to bail. Knew it for a certainty at first, as the beast seized him once more, and the liquid necessity made its will known again, even as he fought it with the impotent tools at his disposal.

But she hadn't.

Then, the tools had gained power, as she had remained. He'd gotten his thirty day chip on the same day they'd been married. That day had carried with it a second anniversary, one year to the day after their re-emergence into their world, and for a wonder, he'd been slip-free ever since. It still crept near in the small hours, if he was awake and she wasn't, or if they were apart for a time, but the combination of the twelve steps and his memory of his time in that other world where he could say no were enough to carry him beyond it.

Then, she'd gotten sick.

Just hints of it at first. You know, a little coughing, and the occasional shortness of breath. Nothing much of much at the front end, but screams of recrimination in the end-game, where everything became obvious, and you were sure that if you'd paid attention at the time, this could have all been averted.

Then came the worsening, but it was slow and inarticulate at first, with symptoms vague enough to side-track the laid-back GP they'd both seen and liked out of the gate. Potential respiratory infection and allergy studies had stolen enough time to put her in stage four before an accurate diagnosis, and by then treatment options had been limited and ineffectual.

Once they'd arrived in that negative wonderland at last, his first plea to return to the boat had not been long in the making. Her resistance had been immediate and emphatic, and in

retrospect, should have raised at least some distant alarms. But love and impending departure muddy the waters, don't they, he thought to himself, as they ascended towards the gloom of the arched opening.

Now that they were closer, he could see dim light shining down from above into the darkness of the stairway, and discerned a landing several steps past the arch where the stairs turned ninety degrees and continued upward toward the source to the left. As they reached it and turned the corner together, he was struck by the mental image of the big, terminal C erased in an instant by their return to this uncertain never-land, where rules were hidden and their former life now lost to them.

The feel of her hand and the surety of her tread on the stone steps beside him allowed uncertainty no purchase, however. Instead, he merely squeezed her hand, and focused on what was to come, trying to ignore the discomfort of his wet clothes clinging to him, and the quiet squelch of water in his shoes at each step.

They reached the top of the steps and stepped onto a stone-paved courtyard surrounded by manicured lawn and flowering shrubs. Above them was a green and white striped awning shading the entrance to the stairs, and as they passed beyond its shadow, bright sunlight fell upon them. They both squinted and raised a free hand to shade their eyes as they crossed the

courtyard, a sea breeze soughing through the tall trees that lined the edges of the gardens, reducing the view of the surrounding sea to bits of glinting azure between the brown trunks. Before them was the building they'd seen from below.

It rose above them three stories high, and the sun was soon lost in its shadow as they walked across the stone tiles towards it. The two upper stories seemed to be apartments, based on individual balconies bracketing closed French doors. There were four of these per floor. The exterior walls were of the stone and stucco variety, overgrown in sections with climbing vines dripping with multi-colored flowers. The interiors of the apartments were clouded in shadow through the glass doors, and there was no movement within that he could see.

The bottom floor was mostly stone fascia, except for a central wooden counter-top taking up the middle third of its length. Behind this was a shadowed alcove, with what appeared to be a door at the far right, as well as several post-boards mounted to the back wall to the left of it. Above the alcove, centered below the two innermost balconies, there was a large sign.

The moment his eyes focused on the sign, he felt a twisting sensation in his mind like nothing he'd ever felt before. For just a moment, the demarcations across the face of the sign meant nothing. They were just random squiggles, like decoration.

Then, they were words, with just that little flip in between.

The sign now said "Station Six" quite clearly, in weathered bronze letters against a graying wood background.

He stopped a half-step before Sophia did, not enough to separate their grip on each other's hand.

"Did you see that?"

She nodded, and then pulled him along again, and in a moment they stood before the counter.

The counter-top appeared to be mahogany, with a deep patina and countless minute scratches concentrated across the center section indicating years of use. The door to the right was made of an iron-bound dark wood as well, and he could see that there was no exterior handle. So, if it was ever opened, it certainly wasn't from this side.

The post-boards were actually chalk-boards, both large and taking up most of the rear wall's real estate to the left of the door. As before, there was that odd little flip where the content on the board clicked from meaningless to obvious as they set eyes on it. He felt his stomach lurch a bit, and absently articulated his discomfort, even though they both now clearly saw the messages scrawled in capital letters, white text on the charcoal gray backgrounds.

"I could do without that."

"Me too."

The far left one was only a couple of paragraphs long.

Sophia began to read it out loud. It was something she did compulsively when they traveled, as if processing text outside of their day-to-day context was easier if she externalized it. It had become background chatter in their previous life before she'd gotten sick. He only noticed it now because they'd not gone anywhere that wasn't a hospital in quite some time.

"Greetings, Traveler. Please note that multiple destinations on the main line are currently inaccessible. We are working to restore service, and we appreciate your patience in the meantime. Please refer to the schedule board for more information. Way-station apartments are available during these delays.

Ticketing has been relocated to the departure platform. To obtain tickets, or an apartment token, please see the attendant downstairs. The platform stairwell is to your left, behind the building. Safe travels, and many thanks."

The other board was more complex, listing rail lines and destinations in a loose grid, with associated status fields. It didn't take them long to realize the implications of the content. He was first, this time.

"It's pretty clear where we're going, then."

He sensed rather than saw her nodding next to him before she spoke, as he was busy reading at least twenty versions of the same thing.

There were eleven stations on the board, and each one listed a "Hub line" and a "Spur line". Only the Spur lines appeared to service actual destinations, all of which were designated "inaccessible", save one. All the other stations showed the status of both lines as "delayed" across the board. Station Six, the station they were currently at, also listed both the in-bound and out-bound Hub line as "delayed". But the in-bound Spur line was listed as "on time". Beyond the "on time" designation was another field which contained a number, "3:36:04". As they watched, the ":04" ticked down to ":03", and then to ":02", the chalk re-writing itself as the timer counted down. For all the other stations, this field was blank. The out-bound Spur line also contained a number counting down in sync with the other, twenty minutes beyond the first. The destination listed below the line was "Dark Lake territory - Struggleville marina", and instead of being listed as "inaccessible", there was a simple chalk happy face. It seemed pretty clear that there was only one train running right now. He turned to her.

"Really? Another marina?"

She shrugged, also turning away from the board in front of them to face him, a mischievous grin on her face. She was clearly enjoying all this, no matter how weird it was.

"Why not? You got me out of the first one, didn't you? C'mon, let's go, there's more to see."

She grabbed his hand and led him away from the counter. He fell into step behind her as she dragged him around the building, where they found another stairwell leading down at the other edge of the court-yard. The entry was dim, but light pulsed slowly from below, glowing light shades of blue that reached up from an unknown source, illuminating a left turn landing. They quickly reached it, and turned, making their way down a second, much longer flight to a stone platform below.

As they passed below the plane of the roof and got their first look at the train platform, they stopped as one, stunned.

The platform was of the same light-colored stone as the structure above, and stretched perhaps 100 yards in each direction to the left and right, and about half that ahead. It was bifurcated along its length, with twin steel rail lines running in between the halves, floating with no visible support structure anywhere along their length. An arched bridge in front of them gave passage above the rails to the opposite side. The rails ran away to either side of them, but view that demanded their attention was the opposite wall.

There wasn't one.

Well, there obviously was, because *something* was holding back the sea that stretched away beyond the platform, its surface visible at least fifteen feet above them, the shifting of the water giving movement to the sunlight streaming through it. The same seascape that they'd been inserted into upon their arrival stretched away before them until it was lost in a dark blue blur, with the same underwater greenery and schools of brightly colored fish in the fore-ground. He thought at first that the wall must be made of glass or some other translucent material, but he could see no reflected light anywhere on its surface. It was as if the sea just stopped beyond and above the platform, held back by who knew what. The effect was at once nerve-wracking and fantastic, leaving him feeling a bit agoraphobic.

He tugged her ahead this time, and they both continued down the few remaining steps to the platform. He turned his head left to follow the tracks, both of which paralleled each other for a short distance, until the outer track curved away from the inner one. The inner track seemed to arc slightly to the left as it ran away into the indeterminate distance, but the outer one continued its curve until it was perpendicular to the inner as it also disappeared from discernable view. Looking now to the right, he could see that the rails mirrored this same

configuration on that side. Above and below each set of rails as they moved away from the platform, he could see slight, arched shadows, which hinted at the boundary between the water around them and the air within. It was as if there were tubes of breathable atmosphere encasing the rail lines, holding the sea back, which made sense from a transportation perspective, but the visible parameters appeared to be thumbing their collective nose at the laws of physics.

An ornate, fluted metal stanchion held a sign aloft near the bottom step of the stone bridge. The sign did its little brain-tweaking flip, and then proclaimed "Hub" with a downward arrow, a single vertical line as a separator, and "Spur" with an upward arrow. This would appear to indicate that this side was the Hub line, and the other obviously the Spur.

He let go of her hand, turning to look at the wall behind them. Glistening white subway tile ran the length of the platform to a height of about ten feet, and then the stone of the structure behind ran upwards and beyond it, distorted by refraction and movement of the water. The amorphous green fringe of tree limbs far above waved slowly according to the dictates of the wind and the distortion of the shifting water above.

There was another alcove and wooden counter to the right of the stairs very similar to the one they'd already seen, except smaller, and with no door or chalk-boards behind it. There was

also a pass-through on the left side of it, a section of the counter folded back upon itself to allow access to the area behind it. The alcove was currently unoccupied. He could see two items sitting on the right side of the counter, but without closer inspection, he couldn't tell what they were. Sophia's voice broke the silence and distracted him from it.

"This is incredible."

He turned back to her, and saw that she was still enraptured by the view in front of her. He smiled.

"Hello, understatement."

He returned his attention to the counter, crossing over to it in a few slow strides. The items on the counter resolved themselves as he did, becoming three instead of two, and a feeling of inevitability flooded through him as he recognized at least two of the three.

Two paper tickets, one layered askew over the other sat next to a circular metal disk the size of a half-dollar. He ignored the tickets, knowing instinctively what they were for. He picked up the disk, inspecting it.

It was basically a coin, with a stylized representation of a building on the visible side. He flipped it, and saw the same on the other side. He felt Sophia at his elbow just before she spoke.

"You know what that is, don't you?"

He shook his head as she took it out of his hand and turned to look at him.

"You mean, besides a recurring thematic element? No."

She was grinning expectantly, but frowned slightly when she saw the incomprehension on his face.

She rolled her eyes, and held the coin up in front of his face.

"This is the apartment token!"

When his confused expression deepened, she laughed and palmed the coin, reaching up with the other hand to pat his cheek, an indulgent look on her face.

"Let me spell it out for you. I'm pretty sure this will get us into one of the apartments up there." She pointed upward. "We have over three hours to kill until the train, or whatever, shows up." She looked at him expectantly.

Understanding dawned slowly, and she saw it begin to bloom on his face. She nodded.

"Yes. I see you finally got there. You're about to get lucky, Captain Morgan."

He couldn't suppress a grin as he looked down at her, clad only in a damp hospital gown.

"Yaarrh, lassie."

She grabbed his hand yet again, and pulled him toward the stairs. He quickly snagged the two tickets off of the counter as

they moved away, folding them together in his grasp and shoving them into his pocket.

They made their way up the steps again, and onto the courtyard stones. There was an entrance to the building on the nearest corner of the opposite side from the front counter, and they went to it. Sophia pulled one of the double wooden doors open, and they passed through, and ascended the stone steps to the first floor. A hallway led left at the top of the stairs, and four doors lined it to the right.

She stopped at the first, examining the handle.

There was a boxy apparatus above the handle, with a slot at the top and a turn-key facing outward below it. She dropped the token into the slot and turned the key. They heard the bolt withdraw with a metallic scrape, and she pulled the door open.

Beyond was an apartment with a single queen-sized bed, a chest of drawers, a small table with a single metal chair pushed underneath, and the French doors they'd seen from below providing the only illumination within. A door to the left led presumably to a bathroom, but who knew. That was obviously something for later.

Sophia didn't hesitate. She dragged him by the hand into the room, letting go of him only to proceed to the glass doors. She undid the latch, and threw them wide, opening them onto the balcony. Her confidence and forward motion galvanized him in a

way that had been long dormant, and the return of it brought an almost frantic desire, like their first years together. She seemed to sense this, and turned back toward him, shrugging off the hospital gown with minimal effort.

She was back-lit by the open doors, but there was enough ambient light to illuminate her thin form, and diminished breasts. He had witnessed her diminution as her disease had had its way with her, when the visible demarcations of her ribs and hips had re-emerged after their slow erasure during their early days. Desire and sorrow were indistinguishable within him as she leapt forward, tackling him and carrying him backward onto the soft mattress. There was strength and vitality returned to her now that had been nearly extinguished, and tears ran down his face, even as he helped her divest himself of his own soggy clothing.

Then, this strange new place drew back for a time as they regained a portion of something stolen from them.