

Ch. 5

Welcome to Struggleville

She woke him from behind a thin scrim of sleep with a cool hand to his forehead and quiet words.

"Almost time to go. On your feet, sailor."

He was instantly awake, and saw that she was now dressed in gray leggings, and a black t-shirt. She responded even as his eyes widened in surprise, and he sat upright on the edge of the bed.

"Shouldn't be a surprise, right? This place equips you before it beats the shit out of you, remember? I found them in the dresser. Even got a bra that fits." She flipped her shirt up to show him.

"You find anything else?"

She shook her head.

"Nope, just this. Nothing for you, but your clothes are mostly dry anyway."

"How do you know it's time to go?"

She smiled.

"Because I'm not old, and having sex doesn't knock me out for over two hours. I thought we established that a long time ago. I went downstairs again while you were sleeping."

He blushed despite himself. She laughed, and offered him a hand, pulling him upright. He dressed quickly while she stepped

out onto the balcony to stand in the sunshine, the wind higher now, whipping at her hair as it pushed its way into the apartment. He sat on the side of the bed, once dressed, and pulled on his socks and shoes. He could see that she was still barefoot.

"No shoes with the clothes?"

She turned, shaking her head.

"No. No food anywhere, either. I am *starving!*!"

He grinned, tied his last shoe-lace, and then leaned back, reaching into his front pocket. He pulled an energy bar from inside, the packaging crumpled and the shape indistinct within. He tossed it to her. She caught it neatly, and wasted no time tearing it open, stuffing bits of the damaged snack into her mouth. She groaned in delight.

"I thought if we ever got this far, that might be the case. It doesn't give everything back, does it?"

She didn't bother to respond until after she had shaken the last crumbs out of the packaging into her mouth. She swallowed them, and then turned back to him, a grateful smile on her face. She came back into the room, advancing towards him.

"It does not, but you do."

They embraced, and she squeezed him hard before letting go. She returned to the open doors to the balcony, and pulled them shut, and then they left the apartment behind.

They descended to the train platform, and made their way across the stone bridge to the outer portion of it. There was no place to sit, which he thought was odd, so they stood looking out at the sea before them. It was full of color, light, and movement in the foreground, and a deep blue darkness beyond. He left her, and walked to the edge of the platform, reaching a hand out toward whatever separated the water from the station. His hand met resistance where the stone of the platform ended, temperature-neutral and unyielding. It reminded him of the black portal doors on the boat, when they were activated, but without the second penny key to pass through. For all he knew, this was the same. He asked the question that occurred to him.

"How long, do you think?"

"I'm guessing, since I don't have a watch, but I checked the board before I came up to wake you. Less than ten minutes, I pretty sure."

"This is so weird." He ran his hand back and forth across the nothing between himself and all that water. She appeared at his elbow, and put forth her own hand. She didn't comment.

Movement caught his eye to the right, far out in the blue. Small winks of light sparked there, and then quickly resolved themselves into silver train cars sliding along the incoming rail line. The train was moving fast, and grew quickly in size and distinction. The individual cars were all uniform in shape,

with no variance, so there didn't appear to be an engine pulling them. They were rounded downward at each top end, like Airstream RV trailers, but with a ring of windows that at a distance appeared contiguous and unbroken. It made them look like the roof of each car floated along above the lower portion unsupported.

They could feel the air moving ahead of the train now, pushing into the station as they watched its distorted approach through the intervening water. It was cool, and held a hint of salt. The train reached the turn that brought it parallel to the Hub line, and slowed as it pulled into the station. He could see now that there were thin metal supports holding the roof of each car aloft, and glints in the space in between told him that there was glass or some other transparent material filling the empty space in between.

The train made little sound as it came to a halt, centered under the stone bridge. Two doors on each car slid almost silently aside, revealing themselves only by their movement. Once the train was fully at rest, there was no sound in the station, except that of their own breathing. Through the door, they could see plush dark carpet on the floors, and upholstered benches lining the walls, which appeared to be made of red leather. The material shone with an aged patina, the top of each

backrest just visible through the panoramic windows, and the carpet was trampled in the high-traffic areas.

They entered the car, but as they passed through the door, a dull double-chime sounded to the right of the doorway.

A small metal box stood atop a thin metal pole there, at about hip height. There was a thin slot and a red glass lens pulsing on the top face of the cube, but it was otherwise seamless. Instinct kicked in, and he pulled the two slightly damp tickets from the rear pocket of his jeans, and fed them one at a time into the slot.

The glass lens went dark for a moment as the tickets were received, and then flashed green twice, before returning to darkness. The doors slid shut as they made their way to a bench near the center of the car, and the train began to hum as they sat down. Then, it jolted slightly, and was in motion once again, pulling out of the station along the track ahead. They watched as the sea surrounded them, and not long after felt the train bend away from the Hub line as it made the curve carrying it out into the deep blue ahead, and whatever would follow.

They rode in silence for a while, as they passed through an indistinct blue haze, lit by the sun through the surface of the water above. Out in the distance, there were occasional huge black shapes moving at the lower perimeter of what they could

see, hints at the denizens of the negative troposphere they were currently passing through.

They were maybe twenty minutes into their journey, before he sensed a change in her. He could feel her start to fidget beside him as their time en-route elongated, occasional plucks at her clothes and a random sigh or two turning eventually to more aggravated movement. She turned in her seat to look behind them, even though the view was exactly the same on that side of the car. She sighed more deeply, and there were huffs of exasperation at the end of these. He gave it three iterations of each, before he spoke up.

"What?"

Her response was instant.

"Why the theater? Why the accommodation? Why clothes and no fucking shoes?"

He turned to her, and embraced her, because while he hadn't known that this was coming, it made sense. Her anger was not just prompted by this parody of reality they'd fallen back into. This was about the pre-emption of death, the unknown that came after. He'd known her long enough to know that she would obviously explore this space. He gave her what he had, as he always did, because *she* always did. This was them, wherever they ended up.

"We can't know. You know that. It plays out, and so far, it's a win."

She was stiff in his embrace for a time, but then relaxed by slow degrees. She was silent for a long time after, as the train passed through a contiguous version of sameness that extended before it as far as either of them could see. Some time later, she sighed.

"Sorry. I crashed there, I think. I was giddy, from the time we got here, but all of a sudden, I'm seriously pissed."

He kissed her forehead again, giving her a slight squeeze.

"Why not? All we had is gone. Except you aren't. I said it's a win, because we get to go on together."

"To what, though?"

"I don't really care. I didn't save you, this place did. It gets what it wants, but all I want is you. You saved me, and as far as I'm concerned, the math is all on your side."

She looked up at him, arching her eyebrows.

"My side?"

He didn't blink, or look away. The immediacy of it brought the threat of tears, but not quite the articulation. He was able to say what was necessary without the emotional drama.

"You know exactly what I'm saying. You took on my weakness. I'm still here because of you. You saved me."

He saw her catalog a number of responses internally before choosing one. He wondered what the rest of them might have been even as she smiled, and spoke.

"Don't be an ass. Here we are. I saved you, you saved me. We have no debts, you and I."

He thought to argue, but a change in the light in the car distracted both of them, and the slight change in equilibrium had them both tighten their embrace.

The light grew within the car, and they could see that the train was rising towards the surface at last. Outside, the sea-bed rose out of the darkness into visibility and rushed upwards toward the convergence of land, water, and air that soon appeared ahead of them. They passed through it, and saw a short depth of white sand beach flash past as the tracks rose and entered dark green forest, still rising. Ahead of them, the previously unsupported tracks crested onto a stone tower that passed by as fast as it registered, and then the train was running through a cleared beltway through dense trees. The stone tower supports for the tracks came at regular intervals, rushing towards them and then falling quickly behind.

Ahead, they could see two immense mountains with a small gap in between directly ahead, with a range of smaller ones stretching away unbroken to either side. The railway ran arrow-straight ahead of them, and at the base of the gap between the

two mountains ahead, they could see glints of light, even from this distance.

He let go of her with one arm, and used the free hand to scratch absently at his scalp, trying to remember. He couldn't, as usual.

"What's the name of this place, again? Where we're going?"

"Struggleville marina."

He shook his head.

"No, the other bit."

He could tell she'd passed on the opportunity to rib him about his memory, age, or mental faculties just by her body language. Her answer was mostly absent of any residue of this.

"Dark Lake Territory."

"That's not ominous at all, is it?"

She shrugged, looking ahead toward the front of the train, the destination ahead resolving itself slowly into the obvious reflection of the sun on water. She was silent for several minutes before she spoke again, her voice quiet and tentative.

"Welcome all you suckers, to Struggleville."

"What?"

She shook her head, as if to clear it.

"I don't know. A song, I think. I can't remember for sure."

They were nearing the terminus quickly, but before they reached it, the forest to their left disappeared and they could

see a large town stretching away, bounded in the distance by the same woods that defined the edge of the beltway. Stone and timber buildings with narrow streets in between slid past for a time, even as traffic-lights and neon signs gave testimony to the place the town occupied in time, or at least technological evolution. Vehicles moved on the streets, but their design was at once generic and unfamiliar, as if viewed by one transported to another country. The signage oriented to be discernable from their vantage was almost instantly understandable. That little hiccup between was nearly gone. It occurred to him that maybe they were attenuating to this place, and that the process was nearly complete. It was based on little evidence, but it felt right.

The town ended as the forest began again, but the train began to slow, and the trees began to thin almost immediately. They passed beyond them only seconds later, and they got their first clear look at what could only be Dark Lake.

It was immense, stretching away for miles ahead and to either side, until it narrowed again at the base of the two huge mountains they'd seen upon cresting the first rail support tower. The summits of both were covered in solid blankets of snow, and the tops of the smaller ranges that marched away to either side were dusted with the same. The surface of the water wasn't the typical blue reflection of the cloudless sky above.

It was a deep charcoal color, seeming to leach light from the atmosphere directly above it, while at the same time reflecting bits of it back as the surface of the water moved according to current and wind. It was yet another very strange juxtaposition. Sophia rubbed one eye before stating,

"Apt name."

He nodded, but didn't say anything as the train descended quickly across wild grass-land dotted with drift-wood tangles towards the edge of the water.

They could see a high concrete platform near a narrow beach where the rail line ended, rings of water-marks at its base bearing testament to the rise and fall of the water level. A raised wooden walkway followed the curve of the shore to the left, and they could see a jumble of buildings at its terminus. On the lake adjacent, they could also see what could only be their destination, Struggleville marina. The train eased in slowly alongside the station platform, stopping with the smallest of lurches. The doors of their car opened with twin muted sighs, and they both stood and exited the train, stepping out into the sunshine onto the scuffed concrete.

They brought their hands up to shield their eyes nearly in tandem, and even this little thing sent a tiny thrill through him. It was just more evidence that they were still they, together, not alone.

They crossed the platform to the walkway. He glanced at her. She was looking intently at the docks reaching out on the lake, vessels bobbing slightly at their moorings, a frown on her face.

"What?"

She didn't stop, but she squeezed his hand.

"Look at it. Do you see?"

"See what?"

She pointed at it, more for emphasis rather than to direct his gaze.

"Look at how it's laid out."

He focused on it as they crossed the first section of the walkway toward the buildings ahead, passing over the first of many timber supports rising up out of the sandy beach below, keeping the walkway out of the water's reach. Behind them, individual car doors closed, and the train whispered its way out of the station again. Neither of them turned to watch it go.

They were caught up in what lay before them.

He got it with a little mental thump, as the significance of it became clear. He sighed.

"It's the same as yours. I get it."

She nodded.

"Not only that, look out there."

"Yeah, I see it. One empty slip."

"What do you bet it's slip fourteen?"

"I'll take that bet."

It was her turn to sigh as they made their way along the curve as the breeze off of the water tugged at their hair and clothes. It wasn't cold, but it wasn't warm, either.

"What do you think it means?" Her tone belied the interrogative nature to the question, and she didn't seem to really require a response, but he couldn't help it. Talking through this was all they currently had.

"At the risk of being accused of unnecessary pessimism, I'm leaning toward a task as yet undefined that is going to kick our asses. There's too much here in the advertising not to be."

She didn't immediately respond, and the assemblage of buildings ahead of them became clarified in purpose as they neared. It was a boardwalk, and some of the signs visible above them attested to this. Many of them had the glass tubes assumedly filled with neon, but all of them were dark. "Lakeside Arcade" and "Drizzle-cake" were among the few large enough to read from this distance, but as they closed in, more announced themselves. The little hiccup was entirely gone, and they could now see carnival rides beyond the buildings, a Ferris wheel towering above them. He said it, because he couldn't help it.

"There's no one there. Nothing's moving."

She reached over and patted his forearm even as they neared the end of the walkway, the boardwalk common now visible through a tall wooden archway.

"From Captain Morgan to Captain Apparent in one sentence. I salute you, sir."

He burst out laughing. He loved her sense of humor, and her delivery was perfect. It jarred him out of his sense of impending disaster. He decided not to assume that this would end badly, because they'd survived it before.

"Babe, you kill me."

"I'll be here all week."

They passed under the archway into the common, getting their first unobstructed view. All the buildings here faced the common, forming a large horse-shoe with the open end facing the lake, wooden railings crossing the gap between the two outermost buildings.

All of them were closed and shuttered, their signage dark and dormant. Many of them had signs posted, proclaiming slightly different versions of the same message.

"Closed for the season. See you in the Spring!"

On the opposite side from the archway they'd come through, there was a duplicate, and more of the elevated walkway along the lakeside, obviously giving access to the rides and the marina beyond.

In the center of the wide common area, there was a huge carousel, complete with brightly painted horses, and bristling with glass light bulbs. Like everything else, it stood quiet and at rest, surrounded by hip-height portable posts threaded through with gray rope. Everything said quite plainly, "Nobody home".

So when the little girl appeared from around the backside of the center of the carousel, hands trailing along the rows of horses that she walked in between, they couldn't help but stop in surprise.

She caught sight of them a few seconds later, and she stopped, too, just in front of a gray horse with bright red and green markings. She stared at the two of them.

The moment stretched, and then Sophia stepped forward a single step, and spoke.

"Hello. What's your name?"

The girl didn't answer, just looked at them, her dark eyes and expression inscrutable.

Then he felt rather than saw Sophia stiffen, and an instant later she was in motion, sprinting to the left toward a seemingly random storefront with "Curios and Must-haves" written in deep blue paint on the sign above the single shuttered door.

He didn't have to interpret it. It was there in the same marriage short-hand. He knew. She'd gotten the prompt, and in

the inevitable progression of this place, things had just gone to shit.