

Ch. 6

Troubled Child

She'd waited until several months after they'd been married to finally tell him about the prompt. He'd asked a few times prior to that about how she seemed to have impossibly fast reflexes, but those inquiries were always related to their narrative during their first tour here, the assumption then being that it was also their final one. His questions about it were always peripheral to his recovery, though, and she had deflected them at each instance. The reality of his fight against the beast had encompassed everything in the early days. She put up a brave face, but in the hours where he was passed out in failure, or tossed and turned in the thin sleep afforded him in his early abstinence, she'd wept many bitter tears. The idea that she could stand between him and his dark aggressor had seemed like utter folly.

But she couldn't bring herself to separate from him, even in the first days where her optimism as they left that awful boat behind had been almost instantly punctured by the return of his addiction. He'd been right, in that short moment before they'd left it behind. She'd known what it meant in a way she never could have known before their time there. She'd spent enough time under the beast's paw herself to fully realize the depth of that particular weight, though she didn't carry it out

with her in the same way he did. The black flower didn't call to her back in their world, but she remembered what the call had sounded like. She thought that was probably why she was able to stick, even when it was hell with him.

But he had been able to slowly crawl back from it, and her joy at watching it recede in their collective rear-view mirror meeting by meeting had been a slow-motion expansion of hope.

He had been a gift, despite what he had cost her. Even during the beginning, he had given her all he had, no matter what the beast demanded. At his worst, words slurred and movements inexact, he had always been kind, and apologetic, and she had always been able to see the regret in his eyes. He had banished her loneliness even as his struggle had resumed.

Then his sobriety had gained traction, and she had come to know the happiest time her life had afforded her so far. They were partners in everything, and it was all so much easier. There were times when her pervasive fear of the future was entirely eclipsed for long periods by their oneness, and life was a constant preamble of future promise.

So, when she finally told him,

"I can sometimes see a few seconds into the future." he only hesitated a moment, before smiling brightly.

"So that's it. How does that work?"

She tried to think of something now that would help him help her in this, but she was too consumed with her own role, as was often the case.

She closed the distance to the storefront, even as the shuttered door burst open. As the door swung outward on its hinges, she met it, and thrust it back with all her might, turning all her energy to the effort, even as she passed by.

The door reversed its swing at her insistence as she slammed into the wooden store-front, thudding to a halt against the graying wood, air exploding from her lungs.

The net result was that the man on his way out caught the back-swing of the door across his trailing leg, and the impact tripped him up as the leg in question caught behind his other on the forward stride.

He pitched head-long, and the gun in his hand skittered away as he face-planted onto the wooden timbers of the common. Jeff trapped its slide under his shoe, arresting its movement even as the man came to the end of his own impetus.

He picked up the weapon, as the man surged to his feet, frantic in his aggression.

Jeff leveled the gun at him.

"Stop. Stop *right* there."

But the man didn't even hesitate. He rushed forward in an attempt to close before the trigger pull, arms outstretched, but

Jeff side-stepped him neatly, slamming the weapon down against the top of the man's spine as he pirouetted on one foot, following the man's forward movement with the strike.

The man once again measured his length on the hard wood of the common. This time, he didn't get up, now inert against the boards holding him up above the sand of the beach.

Sophia was dragging in deep breaths to replace the air she'd lost in her collision with the store-front when she got the prompt again. The door had swung back towards her after her first effort, and she now hit it with both hands again, shoving it back towards closed again.

As it made its arc away from her, there was a gunshot from within the building, and she saw a portion of the edge of the door farthest from her splinter outward as a projectile passed through it.

She also saw the sleeve of Jeff's gray t-shirt twitch, and a crimson mist puffed outward, even as he reacted to the sound, bringing his unaffected arm up and around, his recently appropriated weapon booming five times in quick succession. Bullets blew through the now mostly closed door next to her in a tight pattern. He ceased firing.

She was at rest. He was at rest. They waited.

One second. Two. Three.

Nothing happened.

He stepped quietly to the side of the door opposite her.

He nodded to her, and stuck the gun barrel into the gap between the door frame and the door itself, and pushed it outward. The door swung open again.

He crouched down, but there was nothing further from inside. He looked around the door frame quickly, pulling back a moment later.

She heard him from behind the open door now interposed between them, light shining through the new perforations in it.

"They're down, whoever they are. If there are more, I can't see them."

She reached out, and pulled the door toward her, side-stepping it. She zeroed in instantly on the thin streams of blood flowing down his injured arm.

"How bad?"

He grinned.

"Adrenalin says no problem, so I'm probably not the best judge. I can barely feel it."

She went to him, and lifted his shirt sleeve, inspecting the wound without even looking into the open doorway. There was an angry red slash across the outside of his arm, but the blood flow was sluggish, slowing even as she surveyed it.

"You're fine."

She turned away, looking back towards the carousel. His reply was equal parts hurt and bemusement behind her.

"That's all the mileage I get out of being shot?"

She didn't bite, focused instead on the gray horse where the girl had been. She wasn't there now, nor anywhere else in evidence. She voiced the obvious.

"She's gone."

His response was free of any emotional color this time. He was all business.

"She had only two ways to go. What do you think, train, or boat? Or maybe we should ask our gun donor?"

The man who'd been laying face-down was now stirring, and they both moved toward him. He rolled onto his back, his eyes fluttering open just as they reached where he lay. Jeff stood over him, pointing the pistol downward at his face.

"Greetings. Tell us about the kid."

They both saw the man's face harden, and registered the impending movement in his body. Jeff didn't hesitate. Splinters exploded next to the man's head as the gun kicked, tar-soaked timber shards pricking the man's face as the report echoed out across the gray water. Blood began to trickle towards the man's ear as he slowly opened his eyes once again, shut reflexively against the gunshot. Jeff spoke once more.

"Last chance. The kid?"

The man made no movement. His voice was rough, and there was no answer, just a question in reply.

"Who the hell are you?"

Sophia could feel her husband begin to vibrate beside her, his anger beginning to burn. It was not just a reaction to this particular intersection, but a kindling of something that had not shown itself since he'd slipped his captor's chains. Fear blossomed in her for the first time in a very long time. The threat of her own demise had not brought this sort of fear to life. She reached out, putting her hand on his forearm. He did not respond, only knelt down next to the man and placed the barrel of the gun against his temple, shaking her off with his other arm, rivulets of blood now drying to scale below the hem of his shirt sleeve.

"Tell you what. Answer my question, and then maybe, just maybe, this might become a conversation. If not..."

The man stared hard up at them. He seemed to get the lay of the land then, and all the tension left his prostrate form. He put up his hands slowly. Jeff reiterated.

"The kid?"

"I don't know for sure. She wanted off the lake, so I'd guess she's headed to the train platform. We caught her here yesterday."

He sighed, before continuing.

"There don't seem to be much of a way to hold onto her, though. We had her trussed up pretty good, but she was gone again when we woke up.

Doesn't matter. Delilah's on her way. We got word to her, and she always gets what she wants. You kill me, she kills me, it's all the same result. I'm a dead man now."

Bitterness glittered in the man's eyes, before he continued.

"But I expect you two are too. Cold comfort, but there it is. Delilah will blow this world to shit before she'll let go of that little girl."

This time, Sophia was first.

"Why?"

The man hesitated, as though investigating some internal conflict. Struggle within played out in his expression, but not for long. Resolution came quickly, and the man smiled.

"I tell you, you help me out?"

Jeff stepped in, but voice only. The gun didn't move.

"Spell it out. No promises."

The man only hesitated for a few moments before he went on.

"You come in on the train, right? Not from here?"

Jeff shrugged noncommittally.

The man coughed a short bit of laughter.

"Man, you really stepped in it. Strangers don't last long here. If you got round-trip tickets, you'd best use 'em now. Ride out of here with the girl, maybe. Otherwise..."

"She have a ticket?"

The man laughed again.

"That kid don't need no ticket, trust me."

Jeff's voice sounded dangerous as he replied.

"Friend, you're talking, but not answering the lady's question."

Humor remained in the man's eyes, though his smile disappeared.

"Or what? You'll kill me?"

Jeff shook his head.

"No, of course not. Well, not right away, anyway."

"Alright, ok. Just trying to warn you."

"Oh? Because putting a bullet in each of us fell through?"

"Fair point. But I am the one lying here with a gun in his face, now. You and the lady don't look stone-cold, but you both move pretty good, and you're obviously decent with that piece. I'm still trying to figure you out."

"Less figuring. More explaining."

The man tipped his hands outward, while still holding them aloft, a gesture of acquiescence.

"She's the key to something. Something Delilah wants. There's all kinds of rumors, she got special powers, shit like that. But the only people who know for sure are the ones at the top.

All I know is, it's important enough for Delilah to lock down the entire back lake from Dark Gap to Iron-shot while she tries to figure out how to use the kid to get to or unlock whatever it is. The only reason the sheep here in Struggleville aren't under her thumb too is that they ship in all the food, timber, and metal Delilah wants.

But the kid's a slippery fish, like I said. This isn't the first time she's gotten loose, though she's never made it this far before. Only reason we snagged her was we was on the same supply boat she hid on to get here."

Sophia spoke up then, her voice calm, matter-of-fact.

"We might be approaching this the wrong way."

Jeff looked up at her, though again the gun stayed rock-solid.

"How's that?"

She smiled at him.

"We need a native. Make sense?"

He looked troubled, but not for long. He turned back to their captive.

"You a loyalist?"

The man didn't even hesitate.

"If you mean to you now, absolutely. I believe I described the implications of the landscape."

Jeff stood up, knees popping. He replied to her, even though he was looking at the prone man.

"He'll switch again, if it comes to it."

She nodded, offering the man a hand up.

"I know. But I'll know before he does."

Jeff pursed his lips before answering as the man accepted, and she helped pull him to his feet. Jeff then handed her the gun, and stepped back. The man was frowning, obviously lost at their meaning as he also took a step away.

"Yes, that's true. Hope it's enough."

"Me too."

Jeff continued to watch the stranger. He nodded at him as Sophia headed towards the open door.

"Got a name?"

"Priest."

"That your given name, or are you religious?"

"No. Just drink and whore more than most. I'm told it's supposed to be ironical."

Sophia called back over her shoulder to them.

"Anything I have to worry about in here, your Worship?"

"No, was just us two. We knew we overslept, and she was gone. Heard a voice, so...that happened. Apologies to you, if it helps."

Her voice was clear, even as she disappeared into the relative darkness of the shop.

"Your partner shot my husband. He's the one you have to apologize to."

Priest opened his mouth again, but Jeff shut him down.

"Shut up."

Jeff waited, and a few minutes later Sophia emerged, carrying a faded gray ruck-sack. As she passed the open door, she pointed at the upper portion of it, looking at him.

"Nice grouping."

He nodded.

"The outworking of practice. What'd you find?"

"Lots of kitsch, but pertinent to us, a dead guy, some food, what looks like a 1911, ammo, and a radio. And some empty bindings. Sounds like he's telling the truth."

"His version, anyway."

"We all have one, right?" Her smile was disconcertingly beautiful, and Jeff hesitated before responding, but when he did, his voice was seemingly unaffected. He didn't address her assertion, just turned towards the archway leading back towards the train platform.

"Let's go find our girl, and hope she's got something to say. Let's go, Reverend."

"It's Priest."

"You going to insist on that?"

The answer was not long in coming.

"No. Whatever you want. I didn't choose it anyway."

"The Almighty applauds you. Take point."

The man obediently stepped out ahead of them, and they followed, as the afternoon sun began to drift down between the gap in the mountains and shadows began to grow across the landscape before them as they all headed back towards the train platform.

It wasn't long before they got close enough to see that the girl was there, standing at the edge where the train car would be. She obviously heard them coming well beforehand, but didn't turn to face them until they reached the platform. They all stopped at the same time, and the three faced her. Jeff spoke first.

"Priest, step aside."

The man did as he was told, side-stepping to the right and backing up until he was leaning against the metal railing that bracketed the platform, hands hanging limply at his sides.

The girl scrutinized them for a few moments, and then spoke, her voice firm and unwavering.

"This is as far away as I can get. I just wanted to see what it looked like."

Sophia stepped forward, while at the same time kneeling down, trying to make herself smaller in an attempt to equalize somewhat with the little one in front of her.

"Do you want to take the train away from here?"

The girl seemed to think about this for a minute, but then shook her head.

"No. I can't go. I know that. But, that woman makes me wish I could."

"Why can't you go?"

Her reply was matter-of-fact.

"That's the rules."

"Who made the rules?"

The girl's tone seemed reproachful.

"You know. You're here 'cause of the rules."

Sophia was silent for a bit, and Jeff thought about speaking up, but found he had nothing to contribute. Sophia went on eventually.

"What if we break the rules, then? What if we all get on the train anyway, when it gets back here?"

The girl rolled her eyes, as if that was the stupidest thing she'd ever heard.

"You don't have tickets no more. He never had one in the first place." She gestured at Priest, who'd not move a muscle since the conversation had started.

Sophia's tone stayed neutral as she responded.

"Do you need a ticket?"

The little girl shook her head.

"No."

"Then, if you don't need one, can you take us with you when you go?"

The girl shook her head emphatically.

"No. That's against the rules. The train isn't coming back, anyways. You three was the last pieces. Now we gotta go back and fix it."

Sophia didn't respond for several seconds, and when she did, her voice was flat, a statement rather than a question.

"Fix it."

The little girl gazed at them, her expression softening a little, but not much.

"You saw. It's broke. That's the price. It's why you're here."

Sophia seemed to struggle with something momentarily, but her response was not long in coming.

"You said that we are the last pieces. What piece are you?"

The girl seemed uncertain for the first time, her eyes cloudy, and her answer when it came seemed unsure in a way that all of her previous statements weren't. The afternoon darkened even further before she responded.

"I can't see that from here."

Jeff had no idea what this interchange was about, but Sophia seemed to track with the answer just fine.

"You're like me, but much farther out, aren't you?"

The girl nodded without hesitation, smiling, as though Sophia had articulated something that she was having a hard time explaining.

"Yes. Kind of."

"Uh, babe --."

Sophia shushed him with a wave of her hand.

"Do you know what we're supposed to do?"

The girl shook her head.

"No. But I can take you where you can find out. That's my part. At least, I think it is. That woman wants the same thing, but if I take her, then it's bad. So, I run when I can. I knew you was coming, but not when."

"I see. What's your name?"

"Orela."

"Ok, Orela. I'm sorry for all the questions, but is one more alright for now? Before we move on?"

The blonde head nodded, her eyes bright.

"Why do you say the train isn't coming back?"

Orela looked disappointed, as though she was expecting an entirely different question. She seemed to lose interest in the interchange, and her tone was matter-of-fact.

"That was only runnin' because you weren't here yet. Nobody could go out-bound since before I was born. Ask him." She indicated Priest, who'd been listening intently, but hadn't exhibited any discernable emotional reaction beyond his apparent interest. He nodded after a moment or two.

"That's true. You'll notice there ain't no ticket counter here. People have sat in them cars for weeks. They don't move until them folks give up and leave. Then they'd go.

Sometimes people would come in on it, but it was pretty rare. They'd wander into town, and either find a place for themselves, or disappear. Nobody kept track of them that left, 'cause nobody cared, and those that were able to stay were the very few exceptions, about as far from the rule you could get. But, that's Struggleville for you."

"Any of them say where they'd come from?" Jeff was curious.

"Sure. But I told you. Nobody cares. Past don't matter. You make your way, or you don't, and most of 'em don't. Ain't none of 'em made it to back lake, anyways. Not that I heard of."

"Back lake?"

Priest nodded over his shoulder toward the gap between the two titans that bottle-necked the lake.

"Everything past Dark Gap. You can't see it from here, but there's a town at the base of the big one on the left. Beyond that, there's the other half of the lake. That's all hers. Town, too."

Orela nodded her agreement.

Sophia stood, and turned to Jeff.

"You want to get to it, or put it off?"

A lot passed between them unsaid, because that was the nature of years spent together. She obviously had a better understanding of what the girl was and had revealed than he did, so he did what he always did. He backed her play.

"Your choice, boss."

Sophia turned back to Orela.

"Where from here?"

Orela pointed back toward the boardwalk, then at Priest.

"She's got a boat there we can use. He'll show us which one."

Priest's eyes widened, but he recovered quickly, shrugging.

"True enough. Don't know why you're in such a hurry to get killed, though. That's what'll happen, you listen to her and head that way. Definitely not the direction I'd choose."

Sophia snorted.

"Forgive me, Father. It has been years since my last confession. I confess I don't give a rat's ass what you'd choose."

Jeff burst into laughter, and even Priest sniggered a little. He looked at Jeff.

"She's pretty good."

"Man, you have no idea. Let's go."

The new foursome headed back along the walkway as afternoon transitioned into evening. Orela matched pace with Sophia, and reached confidently for her trailing hand, as though it was the new way of things. Sophia's face registered no surprise, and she clasped the small hand firmly, looking down at the small girl beside her.

"Do you know what your name means, Orela?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me?"

"No."

Sophia raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"Why not?"

The girl took a minute, obviously composing a response that wasn't easy for her to assemble. Finally, she spoke.

"You'll make it too important. I'm not the thing that will help you."

"No? What will?"

"That's the other thing. You'd expect me to know, and I don't. I'm tired of questions, ok? Can we quit for a while?"

Sophia could hear the tiredness in her tone. She squeezed the little hand softly.

"I'm sorry, yes. No more."

She turned to look at her husband.

"Can you carry her?"

He didn't hesitate.

"You want a piggy-back there, kiddo?"

Orela smiled, and nodded quickly. He handed the back-pack to Sophia, and stopped, kneeling down with his hands behind his back.

"Jump on."

Orela did, grasping him around the neck. He cradled her slight weight, and rose to his feet, and then they were moving again. Priest hadn't stopped, but had slowed pace, and they were soon a group again.

Ahead, the yellow-gold of an aging sunset deepened to red.