

The Gods of H.P. Lovecraft

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Edited by Aaron J. French

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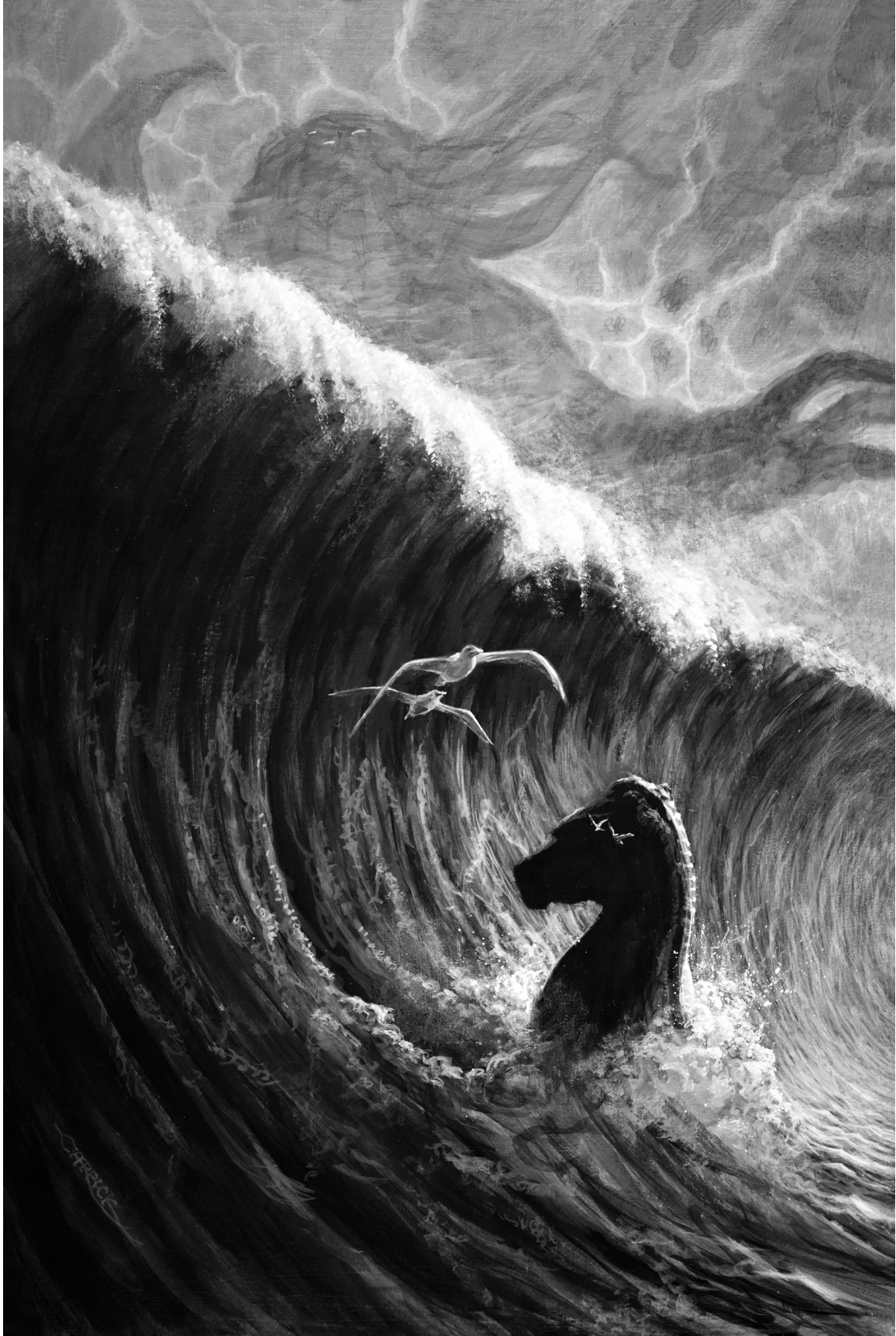
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To Veronica—Who gives me the time.

To Domenic—An awesome little dude.

H.P. Lovecraft

The Gods of



Call the Name

Adam LG Nevill

Upon sand the colour of rust and beneath a sulphur sky, a great shape stretched the length of a long, flat beach. Black salt water slapped the grey mass of lifeless flesh and cloaked the corpse with foam. Embedded haphazardly about the vast bulk were scores of milky eyes that stared at nothing. In the far distance, unto the reddish headlands at either end of the shore, the body remained shiny where unbroken, and pulpy where deterioration had ulcerated the smooth flanks.

In the yolky light that fell through thickening, stationary clouds obscuring the sun, a long beak was visible, lined with small killer whale teeth that always seemed to suggest a smile. What might have been a great fin, or flipper, was as ragged as a mainsail hit by grapeshot, but still pointed at the heavens. In other places, on a shoreline that might have bordered an empty lake on Mars, long pellucid protrusions of jelly streaked the sand, as if the wall of flesh had been disembowelled during a battle of leviathans in the lightless depths of the black ocean. It may merely have rolled upon another vast form and squashed it, or perhaps the mostly transparent tendrils were a part of the corpse. Cleo could not tell. No birds dropped and alighted around this fallen giant. Or was this thing only a substance improperly formed and cast from the ocean as flotsam?

Her appalled study of the thing occurred upon a shore she now recognised as the old esplanade of Paignton. A place as much transformed as the atmosphere, ocean and colour of the sand. When she realised that her inquiry into what *it* was, and *where* she was, was less significant than when this was happening, Cleo noticed that she was no longer alone on the beach.

Behind some dark, red rocks, a few hundred feet away from where she stood gaping, two black, whiskered heads appeared. They were as sleek as seals, but upon the necks of creatures with shoulders and arms.

She moved away about as fast as one can move on loose sand in a dream, which was not fast or far, all the time looking over her shoulder at the rocks. The heads disappeared only to reappear closer to her position, and beside a wall as waterworn as a pebble. The black things behind the rocks raised their snouts in the way of dogs detecting the fragrance of food.

Somewhere behind the long headland of rubble and red rock at the rear of the beach, a great shriek rent the air; air in which not a single seabird was visible. A terrible whimpering followed the roar, issued from a second party. The cry of distress broke a piece from Cleo's heart. Beyond the rocks, the dull thump of a heavy body thrown to the ground could be felt through the

vibrations of the impact as much as heard. What sounded like the breaking of the great woody limbs of a tree, amidst a series of excited shrieks, reinforced her belief that something large was being put to death by something both larger and fiercer than itself.

The thing she then ran over felt crispy beneath her feet and recoiled into itself as she trod it deeper into the sand. She looked down and a face that she was sure had once been human peered at her, but only briefly. The expression was that of a living thing reaching the end of a deep suffering, and an all-too-human mouth gasped and gulped at the air, pinkish gills fluttering in an increasingly transparent neck. The long and now bleaching body beneath the face was that of a seahorse. The spiny tail flicked hopelessly in the sand.

Cleo let forth a sob and wished, madly, to crush this delicate head with a rock to end its misery, but her own pursuers had drawn closer and now seemed to be leaning over their rocky perches and hissing as her panic and weariness increased.

The way ahead was barred by the mottled trunk or appendage, white-spotted by disease, that had been flung up the beach from the great, dead bulk at the shoreline.

Cleo's belief that her attempt to escape in any direction would be futile was horribly complemented by an instinctive assurance that her end in the sand would not come easy. And among the corpses on the beach, and amidst the audible splinterings of bone behind the seawall of rubble, she understood that in this place this was the way of things. Her realisation of such was the worst thing of all.

Cleo shivered awake. Her face was wet. She'd been talking in her sleep too, or crying out; a sore throat attested to that.

She nearly wept with relief as her familiarity with the living room interior slowly returned. Some parts of the room remained strange and were not a part of her home, at least not part of the home that she could recall. Maybe tomorrow these features and objects would be recognisable and bring comfort rather than anxiety.

Another 20°C night.

Cleo drank water from the teat of a closed cup sat upon the tray attached to her easy chair. Once she'd calmed herself with two anti-anxiety tablets, she turned on the media service and watched the world fall apart on a screen.

Fifth refugee ship intercepted by Italian Navy in three days. Thousands confirmed dead. No survivors.

Night vision footage in a late, live broadcast was beamed from the Mediterranean. The Italian Navy had found another ship.

The metal walls inside the drifting vessel were predictably, and somehow functionally, the terrible grey that Cleo associated with war at sea or maritime disaster. Pipes traversed a low ceiling studded with rivets. Paint bubbled with rust. Dust glittered and drifted through darkness

as if it were plankton in a sunken wreck. As the moving camera panned through the greenish air, a moth's frantic capering was lit up.

Immobile forms haphazardly covered the lower deck. They created a lumpen procession that reached out of sight: blankets, exposed limbs, discarded sandals, disparate piles of baggage, and the pale soles of feet that had walked so many miles to reach that ship, but would never walk again. The far end of the wide space was a void.

A figure moved into view. Bulky, too upright, it emerged slowly like an astronaut in zero gravity; a CDC or military scientist encased in a protective biosuit, carrying an equipment bag. Another two men appeared, identically dressed in unventilated suits attached to hoses, waddling cautiously through the jade umbra, their faces grey and undefined behind transparent masks. They too carried plastic crates. All were being filmed by a fourth figure with a camera attached to a helmet.

There were quick close-ups of swollen black and brown faces, eyes open and bloodshot, the mouths crimson slices through which ochre-filmed teeth grimaced. Long-necked, his expression a rictus chiselled from agony, one man opened his jaws wide in a close-up, as if his last act was to scream at death itself. Beside him, a mother clutched a motionless child in a papoose. The small head of the child was turned away as if afraid of the camera. Most of the dead faced the floor, suggesting the life they had departed was unbearable to look back upon, even once.

The footage cut to exterior shots of a large, antique, merchant freighter, blooded with tributaries of corrosion, the white bridge lightless; a vessel adrift. Flares lit the water red. PT boats and a frigate circled at a distance while white searchlights fixed the vessel as if it were a specimen on the black surface of the sea. Rubber dinghies rose and fell with the swell alongside the hull. Marine commandoes were huddled down within the smaller craft, but peered up with their weapons trained on the railings above. The fore and aft decks of the merchant vessel were similarly littered with the unmoving lumps of discarded humanity. The oily sea lapped with the usual indifference about another ancient vessel that never made it across.

The children.

So far away, in the relative comfort and safety of her apartment in Devon, England, Cleo closed her eyes and swam in a ruddy, private darkness for a while. She wanted these sights to remain poignant, but to see too much horror was to normalise such and stop caring. And even this new disease and the never-ending refugee crisis were trifles in *the scheme of things*.

When she opened her eyes, politicians and civic authorities, military personnel and scientists were announced by subtitles that she lacked the energy to read. They each spoke in separate portions of the broadcast. The ship had sailed from Libya; its cargo entirely human; more of the desperate from East, West, Central and North Africa.

A new recording occupied the report within seconds. Amidst a panorama of dark green foliage, enshrouded by mist, a scattering of black shapes could be glimpsed amidst long grass. A subtitle and map indicated a forest in Gabon. Recent footage too, because she had never seen these pictures on any of the twelve news channels that she flicked between whilst remaining motionless in this infernal heat.

Though her discipline and background were in marine life in British coastal waters, as a retired conservationist she remained unable to resist any news story about the desecration of the natural world. Like a masochist, she watched the Sixth Great Extinction unfold in detail, and at its own inexorable, determined pace in this short Holocene Period. And, guiltily, she had no more compassion for her kind than for the fates of the other species with whom humanity shared the world, and had subsequently annihilated. Sixty percent of the world's wildlife was now extinct by virtue of the planet having to accommodate so many people: nine billion and rising. Cleo wished she had never lived to see this.

She altered the setting and the room filled with sound. The recordings originated from one of the last stretches of trees in Equatorial Africa. This was believed to be the very end of the wild gorillas. She had no idea that any were still alive. It appeared that a final two hundred and thirty-seven gorillas had clawed out an existence deep inside one of the last private forests, but now lay silver belly up, or were hunched, heavily furred, but stiff with death and wreathed by flies.

The news service confirmed that the seventh outbreak of Gabon River Fever was responsible; the same pandemic that swept away the remaining wild primates from the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Republic of the Congo, and Uganda. The gorilla was officially extinct, along with the entire complement of refugees on board another freighter carrying the same virus.

The only question she asked herself quietly was the same question she had asked forty years before, in 2015: *what did we think would happen once food aid and food exports eventually ceased?* How could the countries of Equatorial and then North Africa not collapse? And like the viruses that had scattered across the planet in their multitudes, over the last three decades, Cleo knew that Gabon River Fever was zoonotic, spreading from animals to humans. Those people still hanging on in Equatorial Africa had little to eat but game. And in desperation they had eaten the dead flesh of the last apes, fed upon the bushmeat carcasses, and so contracted and then spread a deadly virus that had originated in bats; another species driven from its habitat and thus panicked into spreading a pandemic that was benign in the reservoir host.

Invaded ecologies always seemed to call us out eventually and fight back. But Cleo was also convinced that it was not only the bats that had revenge in mind. *In mind*: but was that even the right phrase for what was stirring? Could something so vast be considered a mind? Or was it an independent living cosmos that we could only compare to our own feeble shreds of consciousness, in the same way that an atom with its orbiting electrons can be likened to a great planet with its moons?

On screen, an academic commentator from Rome commented upon the irony of another species of our closest ancestors becoming extinct, and reaching its end in the very place where our own precursors emerged. He likened the burden of man upon the earth to that of a flu infecting an eighty-year-old woman. The comparison was, at least, sixty years old. Not much use recycling it now. Metaphors only reshape horror; they don't prevent it.

The heat wave, the forest fires in Europe, the Chinese famine, and the escalation between India and Pakistan, had been greedy and monopolised any news she'd seen for months. At least

the fate of the last apes was given a short, late-night spotlight. Though even that was soon swept away by additional reports of another lethal virus, reported in Hong Kong, and one not yet named.

Breaking news, reporting its endless cycles of catastrophe, continued to flicker and flash through the humid innards of Cleo's living room as she stared at the window, a black rectangle of hot darkness. She could smell the warm, foamy brine of the high tide. The curtains could have been carved from marble. There was no wind in the bay, not so much as a breeze. All was still, inside and out.

Those as elderly as Cleo were told to stay indoors and be still, even at night. They could not cool down after the sweltering days. Right across Europe, for three months, heatstroke had cut another swathe through the aged. A perennial event for the continent and its islands. But what she had discovered within a few miles of her own home was of far greater significance than anything she watched on the news.

The women of her family, distinguished scientists and environmentalists, whose pictures were lined up across her sideboard and whose framed specimens decorated her home, had all believed that the desecration of the planet by mankind's thoughtless extension had disturbed *something* greater than we could ever amount to. The very rapacity of her own species had functioned as the worst wake-up call since the Cretaceous-Tertiary mass extinction, sixty-five million years before. Life could never be inactive or silent; the cries of infants for succour would always be heard by predators.

Cleo knew the world could no longer continue as it was anyway. Not while the great fields of permafrost in Alaska, Siberia and Canada so hurriedly released their terrible, long-withheld breath into the air. Enough methane and carbon dioxide to nullify and exceed all revised greenhouse gas emission targets. The forests and oceans were absorbing far less carbon dioxide now. The feedback loops had become a tourniquet around mankind's throat.

The average global temperature was now three degrees higher than it had been in 1990. The higher latitudes were five degrees warmer. Nine billion pairs of fingers were beginning to clutch at the thin wire strung about their throats, some more frantically than others. Sometimes, in her daydreams, Cleo believed she could sense nine billion pairs of feet, kicking up the dust as the chokehold tightened.

The subtropics and mid-latitudes had all but lost their rain. The great collision of the polar cold and the heat from the equator, up there in the sky above the vast, heaving, warm bodies of water, now retreated like another refugee upon the exhausted earth. Tired, spreading out, and meandering to higher latitudes and distant poles, the great writhing cables of wind that once reeled so fast and so high, those great definers of air masses, were taking their precious cool air and delicious rain away with them, as if they were removing all that they could carry out of this heat. The fresh water and the nourishing blankets of gentle, golden warmth were vanishing, along with those near-forgotten climates that had allowed so many to exist.

Her precious oceans were becoming deserts. Canadian salmon were all but gone. North Sea cod was as extinct as the pliosaur. The shell food upon the rocks was dissolving to debris. Great

coral reefs from Australia to Asia, the Caribbean, the Virgin Islands and Antilles were mostly a cemetery of exhumed white bones now, patchily buried beneath six feet of seaweed. One in three of all the creatures in the oceans was dying. Corpses blanketed the ocean floor in the way that dust and ash sand-duned the crematoria. If any human foot could walk where there were once great cities of colourful coral antlers and waving banners, the ruins would crumble like sandcastles bleached by the sun's relentless heat and aridity.

With vapours and gases, the monumental depths and vast glittering surfaces of the seas and oceans had been carbonated and acidified. Those great masses of life, the megatons of photo plankton, that were responsible for producing half of the biosphere, had slowed their engines; great green factories poisoned by man, the blundering chemist. The colossal leafy lungs in the Amazon produced the other half of the atmosphere. But the trees burned while the sea bleached.

Momentarily paralysed by the range of her thoughts, Cleo imagined the epochal destruction man had stimulated and brought to the fetid shores around *it*, where *it* lay stinking. That old trespasser that had created us a long time ago, accidentally, unthinkingly, beneath the grey and furious waves. The great visitor had always existed beneath the surfaces of the world, never upon them.

As her mother had taught her, as her mother had been taught by her mother, and so on, and as Cleo had reported to all of the scientific journals that no longer even replied to her submissions, all life evolved from the tiny organic scraps of an impact against the planet, when something tunnelled through space, 535 million years gone. As a subspecies of it, we had recently grown to a multitude of treacherous usurpers. She had no doubt now that *it* would finish the destruction initiated by the burning of coal on an industrial scale. Mankind had obviously but fastidiously spent his last two hundred years waking an angry parent.

But Cleo had long ago decided to see out *the end* while close to her beloved coves: near the shoreline where her family had been finding the *signs* for generations, and where she too had found her own first signifier. Portents that all should have been studying; signs obscured within the incremental collapse of civilisation. New voices now sang through the wind, rain, and relentless tides, and in the dreams that required a lifetime of interpretation. But every shriek in her dreams foretold that far greater horrors were yet to be endured.

And yet, who had listened to a seventy-five-year-old woman, fighting her own last stand against dementia, a local eccentric whose mother committed suicide in an asylum? But as Cleo ambled round supermarkets and the seaside attractions of this insignificant little bay in the southwest of England, she had told the few who would listen to her that something too terrible for any to fully comprehend, let alone believe in, existed. And that it had been stirring for many years.

Out there, under the world, but also within life as we know it.

Eventually Cleo found the strength to break from her inertia, a blank listlessness suddenly interspersed with racing thoughts, to turn off the media service. The darkness of the room intensified and thickened the heat about her chair.

That night Cleo dreamed of polyps, tens of thousands of blue gelid forms rising from the seabed, growing and trailing their jellied rags until the water of the bay resembled a pond dimpled and thickened by frog spawn. Among them many elderly men and women stood upright, submerged to their chests, as they raised their withered arms to a night sky unfamiliar to any she had seen before. A canopy of darkness wreathed by distant whitish vapour trails that appeared wet, or webbed, and that glistened like dew-drenched spider webs. The people wore white hospital gowns, tied at the neck, and they laughed or cried with happiness as if witnessing a miracle. One or two called out for help. She recognised her dead mother among them.

When the surface of the water became a vast, rubbery carpet, that rose and slopped nauseously in the swell, reaching unto the distant horizon, the thousands of grey and white heads of the elderly people began to call out a name in unison.

Issuing the scream of a frightened child, Cleo broke from sleep.

In the early morning it was cooler and she began the short walk to Broadsands Beach with the intention of walking over the headland to see Elberry Cove. She had inspected and protected the sea grass in the cove during her forty years of marine conservation work for the Environment Agency. Too old to dive now, but she still visited the cove on foot to monitor something else.

Cleo wasn't supposed to leave her home unsupervised. Yolanda, the nurse and carer who came to her home three times each day, wasn't due for another two hours, but by then it would be too hot to go outside.

Cleo returned home prematurely; she'd left the house without dressing properly. Halfway down Broadsands Road, as she passed beneath Brunel's abandoned viaducts, those stone Leviathans that still bestrode each dawn, she'd realised that she was only wearing a nightshirt and her underwear. She shuffled home to dress fully before someone saw her in the street and called an ambulance. By the coatrack in the hall she saw a notice that she couldn't remember making, reminding her to take her medication as soon as she came downstairs each morning.

Finally dressed and medicated, she stood upon the great seawall at Broadsands. Five a.m. and the sun was rising and turning the bay a heartbreaking blue, while polishing the sky with a piercing silver light that would boil brains within hours.

Cleo lingered on the shore to watch an unusual formation of great crested and black-necked grebes upon the sand below. So strange again was their number and positioning. She fumbled for the camera about her neck and found it missing because she had forgotten to bring it with her, and not for the first time.

Until last year, she had never seen more than two or three grebes fishing together at this spot. She spotted twenty that morning, but all on the shore. Below the seawall, a white debris of

gulls also littered the sand, though in their hundreds. They watched the sea disconsolately. None took flight or called out.

Where the beach huts once stood, a viewing platform had been erected by the council for the imminent solar eclipse, and that too was festooned with sea birds, also engaged in an uneasy silence and a motionless peering at the horizon.

As usual with each recent summer, a great green skirt of *Himanthalia elongata*, or thongweed, coated the beach like unsightly, wet wool and was piled at the water's edge. It floated upon and entirely concealed the surface of the sea for a good fifty metres offshore. Within the broad blanket of immobile weed that appeared to have suffocated the very tide, she caught sight of a vast barrel jellyfish, stranded. Other large whitish discs of barrel and moon jellyfish became visible along the shore, resembling unsightly blisters poking through the diseased pelt on some large animal's back. Beneath the weed she imagined the great white tendrils coiled about the impenetrable green fronds of the weed.

There had been a time when the waters of the bay resembled those of the Mediterranean. The officers in Nelson's navy had settled the area because it had reminded them of Gibraltar.

Cleo pondered the hundreds of thousands of spectators who would soon flock to Torbay to watch the coming cosmic event. She believed they were destined to see a sight that the subdued birds, who were too afraid to fish, already anticipated.

Cleo moved as quickly as she could—which was not very fast, her progress interrupted by frequent stops to catch her breath—up the coastal path and across the common to reach Elberry Cove. She now had just under an hour before the heat would be unbearable. Power shortages had rationed the air conditioning so her apartment wouldn't be much cooler, but her thoughts were enough of a convoluted and troubling mess without the sun's heat lighting a fire under them.

As she walked the coastal path and along the cliffs, with the defunct fishing port of Brixham visible ahead, from the sea a familiar hot wind picked up and rustled the trees circling the common. Cleo struggled with her balance and wayward hair, but believed she had just heard those trees call a *name*.

From the beach behind her, as the wind struck the shore, the gulls broke their unnerving silence and cried out in alarm. They took flight and Cleo turned to catch sight of a great squadron of dry wings beating a passage inland, away from the bay where they had once felt safe.

About her on the coastal path, the long, gnarled trunks of the pines, the sweet beech and larch trees, who had all slowly bowed away from the direction of the sea for decades, suggested to her again that they were now striving to uproot and flee the rooty moorings that anchored them so perilously close to the weed-choked Torbay waters. Across the last decade, from Dorset to Cornwall, to her eyes, the leafy heads of the remaining trees on the cliffs and open shores had all taken on an aspect either of flight or fearful supplication. Or perhaps their decrepit posture was simply a cowed, despairing acknowledgement of the endgame that restlessly built out there, deep down.

Few had noticed how these trees leaned, or they had attributed the slant to the wind. Most had lost the ability to understand what the natural world was whispering. But not *all*. Ever

restless with the sea's winds, or motionless and sullen in the summer heat, she believed the trees of the bay had known only a tense expectation of what neared the shore, something felt but unseen. *Right here*, she was sure, was an apprehension that now shuddered the natural world.

Cleo had learned to identify the earth's signs, just as her great-great-grandmother, great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother had done before her. And she supposed the trees would soon thrash their last in the coming storms, and crash beneath the great carapaces of turbulent seawater that were destined to rise even higher than the levels reached in the last three decades. At the end, as *it* rose, she guessed that the trees would shriek out *that name* too, and in a deafening chorus of panic, before they all fell silent forever. *As we must too*. She knew it. She had lived through the *coming* as she slept. Sometimes now, the sights even flickered into chaotic life within her wide-open eyes.

The name, the younger trees sheltered in Marriage Wood called it now too. She could hear them from the distance. The older members of the woodlands hushed them. And as she rounded the headland and descended the hill to Elberry Cove, Cleo heard the name's susurrations arise from the very water. And not for the first time either. In the retreating pull of the surf across a myriad of pebbles that all rolled together, she often heard *that name* now. In the slap and hiss of the sluggish waves upon the baked shoreline were syllables, even the odd consonant, as well as the breathy, rushing spaces between each part of that dreadful signifier.

No one had seen the face of God and it remained ineffable, but Cleo believed she knew *its* name now, and in the many languages of the trees, the birds, the sea, and also from the strange tongues of her dreams. Her mother had once told her that it was only a matter of time before she would hear that name everywhere and in living things. That she would become *a receiver*.

When she first heard the calling of that name she was sure, as were her doctors, that the voices were the beginnings of the family taint; the early onset of the bedlam in her bloodline, a hereditary taint of dementia that remained strong after four generations of daughters were all declared insane in their respective eras. Mercifully, Cleo was childless and the curse would end in her; she would never have willingly inflicted what she knew to be coming upon a child.

Most days, she struggled to recall her dead husband's face, or even when he died, but Cleo still refused to believe a hereditary illness was transmitting such a name into her thoughts. She believed instead that the disease that slowly shrivelled her brain created a susceptibility to the natural transmissions from the earth. Messages that only a disordered sixth sense could detect.

She kept on taking the pills, or some of them, and never uttered her family's theories to any of her doctors. But her ancestors had all claimed that *the name* was first heard in the fossils of this very bay. Her own experiences began in this cove too, though not in fossils, but at the edge of the sea grass pasture.

In the woodland that divided the cove from the drought-resistant maize crop that grew on the old golf course, Cleo began scratching about the paths and undergrowth until she found the tracks that she sought.

The 'ambulances' had definitely made recent deliveries at high tide. Tyre tracks, the thinner tracks of the barrows, and the parallel furrows of the gurney wheels had carved the pebbles apart

on the shore. They led Cleo to a disturbance of dry leaves upon the red clay of the wood that embraced the cove. Here was more evidence of a commotion; a procession, no less, of those who had tried to quickly adapt to a future world that they had also dreamed of. Some had wished to change for a creator whom they had worshipped in secret for years. And a few of their number had already gone beneath the waves for good.

Cleo wondered if some of *them* actually survived out there in the colder water, beyond the weed, or if their drowned and contorted carcasses were now buried among the bent and mournful trees of the woods.

The sea grew deep quickly in the cove. A bank of pebbles dropped to a smooth, red sand. About thirty metres out, at a depth of six metres, eighty hectares of sea grass still thrived. One of the largest surviving underwater meadows in the British Isles. Until she was too old to dive, she spent hundreds of hours in that pasture. Down there she would scour the marine flora with torch and camera, watching the thick, lustrous grass move in the currents. She took a thousand samples across three decades and discovered nothing untoward amongst those fronds. But she still asked herself now: from where did that stone come? A dolmen that stood sixty metres out, hidden on the seafloor where the sun's light barely reached.

During one of her last dives, before she was *retired*, she caught sight of a large, black silhouette at a distance, at the end of her torch's reach. Where the currents caused by the slipway and the reef made it unsafe to swim, *something* had been deposited. Five years ago she had found that effigy and she believed it had remained in place, buried in the waters of the cove.

Once her fear and panic had crashed, she had realised the object was stationary; a rock formation. Drifting out another ten metres, a risky business as the tide was turning and she was not at her fittest when pushing seventy-two in the spring of 2050, she had been able to see more of the rock that reared from the underwater gloom like a saurian head. To her enduring astonishment, Cleo had found herself approaching what suggested the presence of a large black chess piece—a knight, no less—upon the seafloor. Emerging from those great, preserved grasslands was an installation, clearly man-made, though crudely, and casting an onyx gaze over the seabed around itself.

The object suggested a monument, or underwater marker, even an idol. It may just have been pitched over the side of a boat in transit. But whatever its purpose, she eventually found evidence of a congregation, and one never illumined by a marine biologist's lamp. Those responsible for the sculpture existed on land, and in the village of Churston Ferris.

The thought prompted her to plan another visit to the Kudas who lived in the village. And soon, when she had regained the stamina to walk that far, so that she could determine whether they had made the most recent and final leap beneath the waves from this cove. They had seemed due the last time she had looked in on them.

It was getting too late and too hot to move around. Cleo took a pained look upon the water and marvelled again, as she always did, at what had been hidden for so long, right here.

Time was running out; the eclipse was mere weeks away. The sun was turning up its murdering heat. There was no sign of autumn, and she doubted she'd see another one of those anyway.

Cleo sat alone and still in her living room, with the blinds drawn across the balcony doors. The media service was silent and blank. Exhausted and wondering if she would ever reach the end of her drive again, a familiar agitation spread through Cleo's body as her antipsychotic medication cycle neared its end. A palsy quivered her hands and feet.

Yolanda medicated her until she was calm, while stroking her hair. Yolanda was a former refugee from Portugal who worked as a carer for a few of the multitude of dementia sufferers in the bay. She'd arrived minutes after Cleo returned from the cove.

Reclining on the sofa, while Yolanda busied herself with the preparations of a midday meal, Cleo's attention drifted to the portraits of her forebears: Amelia Anning, Mary Anning, Olive Harvey, and her mother, Judith Harvey. She smiled and wiped at the tears that immediately filled her eyes.

As you were, so am I.

Around their pictures were the polished madrepores that her mother had passed down. Upon the walls, pressed weeds hung, mounted and framed by Cleo's great-grandmother, Mary Anning.

After making significant contributions to marine botany and earth science, Cleo's forebears all died raving. Once Cleo began to hear the natural world issuing *that name*, five years ago, and building quickly to a veritable din inside her head, she took measures to prevent a repeat of her ancestors' fates with the psychotropic salves that most of her forebears had been without. So many pills had subsequently been swallowed to dampen the shrieks and the visions. Her mother, Judith, had chosen to eschew the antipsychotic medication. As a result of what her mind was being required to contain and process, Judith had been one day shy of her sixtieth birthday when she took her own life.

Looking at the family portraits never failed to encourage Cleo to ponder the futility of her conservation work in a world that could not reach consensus. A world incapable of saving itself because of a species that could not conceive of its insignificance upon the earth, let alone the earth's insignificance in the cosmos. The women of her family had all endured this Damascene moment too, though haplessly. They had changed no minds but their own either.

'The women of your family were beautiful,' Yolanda said, as she fastened the tray on the armrests of Cleo's chair, following her patient's gaze to the photographs on the sideboard.

'And clever too. Thank you, dear,' Cleo said, her interest briefly moving to the neatly cut sandwiches. 'My great-great-grandmother was none other than Amelia Anning. You won't have heard of her, Yolanda.' She wasn't sure if she had told Yolanda of this before. But evidence of *the visitor* was first discovered by Amelia Anning, and that knowledge alone had driven her mad.

‘Amelia was an amateur fossil collector, a palaeontologist too. A near-unique woman in her time. This was the early nineteenth century, dear. Careers in science were forbidden women. But she, my dear, was a true pioneer. Much of what we know of prehistoric life and the earth’s history is owed to her. She died in her nineties, but was still hiking up her skirts and scrabbling round the Jurassic fossil beds at Lyme Regis in her seventies.’

‘You too, I think, will live so long.’

Cleo tried to smile but lacked the strength.

After winter landslides on the Blue Lias cliffs, it was Amelia who found and correctly identified the first ichthyosaur. She also uncovered a plesiosaur from the same rubble, and the first pterosaur beyond the borders of Germany, as well as many *other* fish fossils whose uncanny influence contributed to her decline.

‘Your lunch, ma’am. You need to eat.’

‘Yes. But it was those damn belemnites, Yolanda. They began her obsession with a set of ideas. An astonishing leap of faith. Few scientists will even acknowledge this. Though in secret, oh how they whisper now.’

‘Of course.’

Amelia’s only child, and Cleo’s great-grandmother, was Mary Anning, who moved to Torquay in Devon to be close to Shiphay Hospital where her mother eventually died, raving aloud her belemnite dreams to the very end.

‘That’s Mary, next to Amelia. A brilliant woman. But the great love of Mary’s life was seaweed, Yolanda. Not fossils. Her first two books are still in print. The first editions are on display at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum. That’s in London. I’ve seen them.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Mary’s first two volumes of *Algae Danmonienses* (Seaweeds of Devon) were relative bestsellers, and much of *Phycologia Britannica*, that catalogues and illustrates all known British marine algae, was dependent upon Mary’s lifetime of study. Though Cleo did not share this with Yolanda, because any talk of Mary’s books inevitably led Cleo to thoughts of Mary’s third and final volume. That was mostly destroyed by embarrassed members of the family, but a surviving copy was passed down to Cleo by her mother, before she too was put away to scream *that name*.

Cleo spoke in between the mouthfuls of bread that she chewed slowly. ‘My great-grandmother, Mary, collected seaweeds, all the way from Cornwall to North Devon, and along the East and South Devonshire Coasts. You know, one large weed was even named after her: *Anningsia*.

‘The leading botanists of her day were her close friends, dear. With them she shared her finds, and *some* of her theories...’ And even those ideas augmenting her own late mother’s more radical ideas about the southwestern coastline. But why trouble Yolanda with that? She couldn’t possibly understand. And as with her mother, Amelia Anning, Mary’s end was neither illustrious nor happy.

Mary Anning’s third volume, *A Dark, Slowly Flowing Flood*, caused grave damage to her reputation because the work was a near-surrealist dream narrative. Mary was a scientist who

attempted to encapsulate great spans of time and the local coast's ever-changing position, shape and environment, but through poetry, water colours, pen and ink. The book never enjoyed anything but a brief, meagre print run at a local publisher, partly funded by Mary. But the lurid contents of Mary's only nonscientific work remained the only indication of what had beset and preoccupied the woman for the ten years prior to her incarceration in the same asylum that claimed her mother.

When Mary took up with the unorthodox spiritualist group, The Fellows of the Broken Night, towards the end of her liberty, she was already binding her eyes with scarves, and threatening to claw them out from the root should her blinds be removed. But layers of linen strips did nothing to stop the sights unfolding behind her eyes. And these sights formed the ghastlier revelations recorded in *A Dark, Slowly Flowing Flood*. The visions that she was stricken with also informed her notorious ravings upon the seafront and piers, where she had stood upon a wooden crate, with her face bound save for her mouth, to address the ladies and gentlemen of Torquay.

A Dark, Slowly Flowing Flood was filled with drawings of the fossilised marine life that Amelia Anning had uncovered and scraped clean. But more complete and detailed impressions of what she derived from the partial fossil forms were fleshed out in Mary's imagination; a creative faculty informed by her own visions. And it was those images that resembled this creator, this destroyer, and remaker of worlds. A visitor Cleo's lineage had long dreamed of, but solely recreated and expressed in ways only communicable through the medium of insanity.

Cleo didn't even need to open Mary Anning's book to see again the gelid grotesques that had drifted through the last, harrowing, tormented years of her great-grandmother's turbulent consciousness. Merely imagining those things had driven her witless, and when they had opened their flabby mouths to sing the *name* in her dreams, Mary had been lost to the world forever. But Mary had always believed that she was seeing an alien species, adrift amidst the deepest oceans of space and time in the cosmos. Forms that had been creating life out of themselves, and then extinguishing that very life, for fourteen billion years: the lifespan of the universe.

The following week, on Friday, at dawn, Cleo attempted to see through the dimpled glass panel set beside the Kudas' front door. She was confronted by the greenish light that rippled in the manner of water reflected upon the wall of a swimming pool. During her first hurried scrutiny of this reception, four years before, she'd realised that the entire lower floor of the Kudas' home had been sunken beneath the level of the ground, and tiled aquamarine like a swimming pool.

Cleo opened the letter box and stared into one of twenty-four houses in Churston Ferris with ground floors permanently converted to the storage of liquid. And could she have subsequently suffered the same hallucination so many times in the same place? Her dementia was better controlled than that.

Despite three restraining orders and two cryptic threats upon her life, she still came here. The death threats, she believed, had originated from a local faith group, either The Latest Testament or One Eye Opening. Her age and mental instability had been the only factors that had spared her the punitive sentences of the magistrate's court.

She moved to the rear of the Kudas' property and felt a familiar delinquent glee at her daring trespass.

Like always, the windows at the rear were shuttered, as were those of the Kudas' similarly *affected* neighbours. The garden was ordinary and typical of the neighbourhood: palm trees, the *Trachycarpus wagnerianus*, pink stone paths, tall fences, immaculate lawns and flower beds, and a honeysuckle covered pergola. The only remarkable feature of the orderly rear gardens was the variety of stone lawn ornaments; all of which, inside the Kudas' yard, depicted black sea horses, perched upon what were either castles or reefs. She had never been able to decide which. But as if the Kudas' sculptures had been interpreted by an artist with nothing in mind beyond a stark realism, Cleo intuited an ugly provocation in the bestial eyes of the four Hippocampus pieces on the lawn.

Her suspicions about this village were first aroused when she followed tracks from Elberry Cove, through Marriage Wood, and linked them to the activity of the private ambulances in the surrounding lanes of Churston Ferris at night. And at a time when one of the newer 'scientific' religions burned through the area with an intensity of devotion not seen since the Black Death cursed Devon, 700 years before.

The arrival of the new faith groups preceded her discovery of the statue beneath the sea in Elberry Cove, by a few years, though she believed the churches had been active for a long time, albeit disguised in plain sight as something else. The ambulances belonged to the age care charities created by the new churches, who had bought the old Church of England buildings of Paignton, Brixham and Torquay, and then set about changing all of their windows into a single curious design. Few antiquarians had seemed bothered, or they had been silenced. Cleo never really knew. But attendances, she'd heard, were way up now. The congregations were almost entirely elderly, though Cleo had resisted their repeated attempts to entice her into their faith-based care programme, and their extensive leisure programme within the community. Her neighbours used to regale her with stories about the wonderful entertainments and events, until she told them to shut up. The mayor and council were happy because the church groups were relieving the beleaguered local health services of much of their burden. 70% of the population of the bay was now over sixty. The corporate charity wing of the church, Opening Eyes, had purchased over half of the region's care homes in the last five years, and the quality of the care was unsurpassed.

But Cleo would never consider an association with any faith that reshaped church windows into what she believed was an eye. One great eye. Big, luminous, but somehow idiotically blank and unsympathetic, and always coloured with a green-, yellow- and black-stained glass that she considered reptilian. The windows suggested they were engaged in some form of penetrating

scrutiny, directed at those who passed below. Surreptitiously, building by building, and even in the listed buildings, she had noted the removal of the cross.

These days, the garden ornaments of Churston Ferris were no longer odd to her, because the actual interiors of that settlement, upon which she had spied so diligently, had proven far more interesting.

Much of the rear patio closest to the Kudas' house had been taken over with an apparatus consisting of white plastic tubes or hoses attached to some kind of a squat generator that produced enough heat to warm her entire body when standing a few feet away. The air expelled by the machine contained a hot, electric, oily odour. The two largest tubes passed through the rear wall of the affected houses. Vibrations could be felt through the hoses, and if she moved her face close enough she could hear water bubbling through the PVC piping. The apparatus was some kind of pump. Above the machine, an extractor fan expelled a tepid air and a not unpleasant odour of salt water. Each of the church's ambulances that visited this village had been fitted with a not dissimilar mechanism for filtering water.

Reaching to her tiptoes, Cleo peered through the mesh screen before the whirring plastic blades of the fan. Until the balls of her feet burned and her old spine cramped, she remained fixed in position and stared with wonder and revulsion at the Kudas' wide living room.

The lens of a light fitted into the front of a limestone rock helped to illumine the watery room. There was no conventional furniture in sight, only several large boulders, arranged around the edges of the room and all containing embedded lights. Upon the floor, a gentle swaying motion was produced by a pasture of submerged *Alismatales*, or sea grass.

In the dim, greenish illumination she saw Mrs Kuda first, crouched upon her rocky perch. And above this bizarre grotto, the naked lady of the house sat observing some activity out of her sight, in another region of the room.

Until she found this pair, Cleo had never before seen a human being covered in such unsightly skin below the neck. Not only had Mrs Kuda been cursed with a hunched back, or a great mane of flesh, spiked by the vertebrae beneath, but her skin was also mottled by large plates of pink-orange psoriasis. Her first suspicion was of the presence of a rare disease in which an amphibian environment offered comfort to the sufferer. But this was no medicinal pond. Judging by the rock-effect walls and lifelike encrustations—the shells, molluscs, and several kinds of hermit crab—the Kudas' living room had been fashioned into a facsimile of a rock pool.

That morning, at least five minutes passed before Cleo caught a glimpse of the man of the house; if his condition made him worthy of the title. What Cleo saw of Mr Kuda was often obscured as he mostly remained submerged and positioned facedown. And whenever his gleaming body passed through the beams that shone upon the water, the three rock lights offered insufficient illumination for a fuller assessment of his disability. His skin condition matched his wife's, while his chest, arms, shoulders, head and neck, were the same as an adult man, albeit one aged, hunched and stooped. But Cleo had become convinced that Mr Kuda had no legs. Or perhaps only one leg. And that morning, whatever it was that extended from his lumpy abdominal region, had curled around a clump of grass in the manner of a tentacle. Using the

long, wavering weed for grip, he then wheeled his large body around in the water while his head remained hidden. In fact, Cleo had never yet observed him rise to take a breath.

Agilely, he swished himself through the water. Ripples from his silent, circular activity spread out and lapped about the rock upon which his wife sat. At the foot of his wife's outcrop, he stopped wheeling and, like a child, gently raised his face to just beneath the water's surface. Carefully, unsteadily, his scaly wife shuffled off the stone seat and sat beside him in the water. Facing each other, they engaged in something approximating a kiss.

What troubled Cleo about this intimate activity was the gap between their faces, and the way in which Mrs Kuda rolled her eyes upwards and so whitely within her lined face. What remained of her withered bosom also palpitated, suggesting a pumping action or rapid respiration. When Mr Kuda eventually detached himself from the ghastly contact, Cleo saw a thin, dark object, like a long tongue, dart back inside her wide open mouth.

Without mistake, Mr Kuda had been dancing, down in those verdant sea grasses, to woo his partner. That hideous wheeling in the paddling shallows was some kind of mating display, and one that she had repeatedly observed in the Hippocampus of the local coves.

Since her first sighting of this pair, and the other less well-formed couples in this village, she found that the sound of the Kudas' generator and fan would follow her home, locked inside her skull. Every time she closed her eyes to sleep, she was sure that the white ceiling of her bedroom rippled like the ceiling of a cave into which the sea flowed at high tide. What also abided and returned in an unwelcome fashion, and repeatedly, like an incorrect slide inserted into a projector, were her unpleasant observations of Mr Kuda's belly, and of the bellies of the other retired men in the neighbourhood. After they broke from the *kisses* with their wives, and gradually glided out of sight, across the watery floors of their living rooms, their gently distended bellies would often move, as if from the squirming of a multitude within.

In the warm shallow seawater of their village dens, she had observed so many who had been rendered infirm by age on land, but who had managed a miraculous transformation, or second life, in water. People who now frolicked and glided through the swaying sea grasses with which they had sowed the sunken floors of their living rooms.

If she were to tell anyone, she would be thought mad and delusional, hallucinating, and although she did plenty of that, the same was also said of her mother, her grandmother, her great-grandmother, and her great-great-grandmother. But the burden of what she knew, she was quite sure, would soon bear the most unappealing fruit in the local waters of this now cursed bay.

That night Cleo dreamed of small islands whose faces were made black with shadow from the great sun that rose behind them, to nearly blind her sight, while turning the seawater the colour of highly polished steel. She stood upon a cliff edge she didn't recognise and looked across a vast panorama of new red cliffs. Great, fresh gouges of scarlet rock were exposed along the front of the cliffs. Vast slopes of rusty-looking sand and rubble had tumbled into the shining

water below, leaving fresh wounds upon the coastline as far as she could see, as if some great storm had caused a century of erosion in a matter of days. From what she could see of the distant hills, she thought she must have been somewhere near Kingswear, but if so then the coastline of South Devon was being rapidly reformed.

And whatever was in the sea below her position was trying to attract her attention. Large black shapes, lumpen, but slippery and shining as they turned and wallowed, dived and surfaced, barked out sounds that she believed were human voices if she listened closely enough. All she could make out of the distant, black faces were the doglike suggestions of the whiskered snouts and flattened ears. But the eyes and teeth were definitely human.

Cleo awoke in the living room. The first thing she saw was Yolanda rising from her chair. The nurse came to her on soft feet, her face one big smile, her lovely eyes wide and glittering with an excitement that Cleo assumed had little to do with her patient waking up.

The nurse must have let herself in as Cleo slept; it was after nine. She had slept badly for the first half of the night, and then tried to stay awake on account of the dreams that her antipsychotic medication was either worsening or failing to suppress; she never knew which. But she'd been in a bad way for a week after her visit to the Kudas.

On the far side of the room the media screen flickered and flashed, the sound muted. Her carer had been watching the news and leafing through the journal Cleo kept to keep track of each day, the sudden emergence of memories, and the effects of the medication cycles. Perhaps Yolanda had been amused by some of Cleo's recollections. She didn't think the journal had much comic value, but then couldn't entirely recall much of what she had written in it. Her prescription would never preserve her mind, but had slowed her deterioration and moderated her mania successfully, providing Yolanda came to her home three times each day to make sure that Cleo took what had been prescribed.

Cleo reached for her glass of water and drank it through a straw. It had gone tepid in the languid heat of the night. She noticed her hands were trembling and hastily took the three pills that Yolanda had already placed on the side table.

Yolanda tried to block the screen with her body. 'This news is not so good. Let me turn it off.'

'Is it ever good? I don't think it ever will be again. But let me see. What have I missed?'

The world. She certainly hadn't missed that while she'd slept. A narrowing space in her mind was often fatigued in its weakening attempt to understand how people had allowed things to get so bad. And in the last few days the seemingly endless war between Turkey, Iraq and Syria had escalated to new levels, over control of the headwaters of the Euphrates and Tigris. The Indians still had their rain, but the Pakistanis had none, and they were also going to war again over water. Even with the sound lowered, Cleo no longer cared to watch the great dust clouds of the continual air and drone strikes, the detritus of devastated vehicles, the moonscape of

obliterated cement blocks that was now much of the Middle East, Kashmir and North Africa. Cleo assumed Yolanda had been watching updates on the respective escalations.

‘Something terrible has happened *here*,’ Yolanda said, her face now stiff with shock.

‘Here?’ It was local news on the screen. ‘Turn it up! Quickly.’

There had been several poignant local events of late, portents and signs on her doorstep, but they rarely even made the local news. This was national news on the screen, but broadcasting from Berry Head; not even two miles from where she lived.

Cleo could see footage of the nature reserve’s unmistakable shape, shot from the air. A limestone headland, and the vestiges of what was once a great tropical coral reef, 375 million years before. The women of her family, whose portraits stood on the sideboard, had even considered Berry Head to be one half of a very old doorway.

As Cleo watched the report, augmented by Yolanda’s excited narration, she could see that a great many people had tried to step through that *doorway*, yesterday.

‘Dear God,’ Cleo said. ‘Those people are from local care homes...’

‘It is terrible. I do not think you should watch.’

‘Nonsense. You think I am surprised by this? *They’ll* do anything to get them into the water.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Open Heart, Open... never mind.’

How those poor creatures flapped and flailed as they went off the edge and down to the sea. At least seventy people from two local care homes. The infirm and the demented, all shrieking as they plummeted through two hundred feet of thin air.

There were only two films of the actual incident that had taken place during the early morning while Cleo slept; footage from the lighthouse security camera, and a shaky film taken by a carer who was now in custody. Yolanda said the films had been on repeat every thirty minutes since she had arrived at eight. Despite all that was happening in the world, Torbay was making international news because the elderly people from two retirement homes had all leapt into the sea, from off the edge of Berry Head.

The police were looking for the other staff who had driven them to the precipice. Speculation was rife. The carers must have helped the victims on and off the buses, before guiding and wheeling them by torchlight to that terrible edge that Cleo had never liked standing anywhere near.

In the recordings, the din of the seabirds was also excessive: guillemots, razorbills, black-legged kittiwakes, the gulls. They were always noisy in their cliffside nests, but as that tired and stooped parade of the thin and infirm hobbled and shuffled off and into the abyss, and down to the terrible black rocks and the churning, bitter, nighttime sea below, the noise of the birds became a true cacophony of panic, rising to a crescendo. Those birds should have been sleeping. But in that riotous avian climax, Cleo heard the name. *The name* screamed with abandon and with the ecstasy preceding tribute. Because that is what she was watching: *sacrifice*. These were

sacrifices at Berry Head, not the victims of mass suicide, or mass murder, as the press were claiming. This was human sacrifice at the doorway, at the very threshold of *what* was waking.

Those poor fools who had been taken to those cliffs by their carers, nurses, doctors, porters, and orderlies of the Esplanade and Galmpton Green nursing homes, had all shrieked the name too, raising their exhausted and frail but impassioned voices to join the din of the birds. They had dropped out of sight either individually, as couples holding hands, and even in one disoriented clump, down into the waves and the rocks where they must have come apart like kindling. None were pushed; all walked, calling *the name*.

The residents of those care homes had been promised that they would see out their final days in as much comfort as anyone could hope for in such desperate times within the country. But they must all have been long prepared to engage in such an evacuation from this life.

The news moved to breaking reports about a dozen similarly affected retirement homes in Plymouth and North Cornwall. There, many elderly residents had been discovered making their way, slowly, on walking frames, and wheelchairs, in the early hours of the morning toward Whitsand Bay and other beaches. Perhaps with the intention of throwing themselves into the sea. It was unclear how many had not been prevented from achieving their goals the previous night.

Cleo had always thought it strange, and perplexing, and unnerving, how local fossils had been shaped into the exterior walls of the Esplanade Care Home in Roundham Gardens, in Paignton, as if to create some decorative feature, using local materials. This alteration had occurred once the property came into the possession of One Eye Opening. She had written to the council to explain about the hidden activity within those stones, but had not received a reply. The same innovation had been replicated in the churchyard walls in Paignton after the crucifixes had been taken down. Cleo guessed those rocks had been embedded in the mortar for different reasons now.

Like herself, she could only assume that the aged made the best material, while their minds dimmed and deranged. They provided the best vehicles to receive transmissions from down there, from beneath the waves of the bay; once the transmitters, the fossils and fossil beds were brought into closer proximity to their poor, confused minds.

Each of the affected care homes in the morning news was owned by One Eye Opening; a wealthy, nonconformist religion they were calling it on the news, for want of a better definition. A definition that Cleo had ready: a *cult*. A cult that had made its disingenuous inroads into the religious community and end-of-life care in a county overrun by an elderly population. It seemed unfair, and horribly Darwinian, that some were being transformed while others were sacrificed to the sea. Though the residents of Churston Ferris, like the Kudas, were wealthy; perhaps selection was dependent upon nothing more sophisticated than that.

Cleo was shocked but not surprised. Across the last five years she'd taken note of many other local curiosities. The great ructions on the seabed attested to by both the Royal Navy and the marine biology unit at Plymouth University. Fishermen using sonar who had claimed that new topographies were emerging upon the seafloor. Sailors, from what was left of the South Hams fishing fleet, had claimed to have fetched some unusual catches out of the local waters too.

With her scepticism in suspension, Cleo had never debunked the stories she had found online of what had been tugged out of the nets, before confiscation on shore by the Environment Agency. Some of the catch was still being examined in the marine biology labs in Plymouth. Desperate were the two marine biologists in Brixham, Harry and Phillip, with whom Cleo retained a vague and hardly reciprocal association after her retirement, to eschew any classifications or rumours of a Fortean nature that Cleo had immediately espoused to them. Harry and Phillip knew why Cleo had been retired, but did admit that they had personally examined five *Eledone cirrhosa* octopus in a lab in Brixham. Creatures generously exceeding all previously recorded sizes and weights. They had been caught in waters off the South Hams coast during the previous year.

Her contacts had also confirmed that the rumours of a giant squid spotted in local waters were not entirely fictional either. They had confirmed that an impossibly sized *Haliphron atlanticus* octopus, with only six legs, but of lengths up to ten metres, had been caught and killed by a Royal Navy PT boat, near the mouth of the Dart Estuary, after reports that it had been menacing a ferry, and had made several attempts to drag at least one passenger overboard. Her contacts claimed that what had been found in its belly, partially digested, attested to the rumours of the fates of three missing canoeists, last seen in the channel below Greenaway and heading towards Totnes the previous year. And had Plymouth's harbour not also been deluged with *Octopus vulgaris*, not three years ago in 2052? A species not seen in British waters since the early sixties of the previous century.

And it didn't stop there for anyone predisposed to seek synthesis amongst the freakish incidents and recent curiosities found in the county's waters. Stone plinths carved with designs the Celts had imitated, and Iron Age man had replicated in stone throughout Cornwall, suddenly found off Salcombe by the engineers tasked with building the new wind farm. Great undersea basalt circles, arranged like teeth in the untidy mouths of what had resembled eyeless faces, had been discovered close to Start Point, South Devon, during the laying of new power cables to transport British nuclear power to the drought-stricken parts of Southern France. Two discoveries alone that had revived local folklore about the possibility of Atlantis having once existed off the coast of Devon and Cornwall. There had been something down there for sure, but Cleo doubted it had ever been Atlantis.

And now the newly managed care homes of Torbay had fossils in their walls, and the windows of the churches had been altered to represent an eye. A geriatric cult had willingly extinguished itself at the cliffs of Berry Head Nature Reserve, in one procession the night before the solar eclipse. Had they also been hearing *the name* and receiving its imagery inside their failing minds? Cleo wondered if she should cuff her own ankle to the bedstead and swallow the key, during what time remained before the eclipse, lest she join Torbay's flightless snowbirds who seemed intent on leaping off precipices.

Yolanda returned at four p.m. later that day, thirty minutes late, and broke Cleo from a short doze.

Yolanda claimed the news from Berry Head was still upsetting for her, and asked Cleo if she could change the television channel. 'I cannot see it again. But it is all they show today. They are bringing in some bodies. I would rather watch the wars.'

Cleo acquiesced as Yolanda would only be there for an hour. The nurse had been delayed by the traffic congestion that had built ahead of the eclipse. The very thought of the cosmic event was now making Cleo feel sick.

'Why not tell me about your family,' Yolanda asked as she brought Cleo's tea into the room on a tray. 'I know these women are so important to you. Maybe they can take our minds from this terrible day.'

I doubt that, Cleo thought, but looked across to the picture of her grandmother, Olive Harvey, who had continued her mother Mary Anning's work with the weeds and rock pools, while working as a conservationist and artist, selling shells, polished madrepores and pressed weeds, mounted and framed, to tourists.

As she ate, Cleo told Yolanda how Olive had spent most of her life outdoors and on the Paignton Coast, south of Goodrington Sands, dipping into the rock pools of Saltern Cove and Waterside Cove. A woman who had fastidiously continued the family trade, photographing and collecting the intertidal flora and fauna: the flat wracks, knotted wracks, red seaweed, snakelocks anemones, and spotted gobys. Most importantly, she became an authority on *Galatheastrigosa*, the squat lobster. The creature had become one of her obsessions because her mother and grandmother, the brilliant but tragic Mary and Amelia, had both dreamed and then screamed about what *Galatheastrigosa* had originally dispersed from out of, the contemporary lobster still partially mimicking some features of its ancient parentage.

Olive had spent decades scraping and digging her way into those cliffs, where the fluvial breccias from the Permian Age amassed about the slates and sandstones from the Devonian Period. The locations of the best fossils were indicated for Olive in the work of her predecessors. Her mother and grandmother's notes had led Olive down to the shore at low tide with the promise, or warning, that future generations of scientists would uncover even greater marvels and terrors from those cliffs.

After the decades of coastal erosion since her forebears had first scuttled, collected and processed their knowledge, the shore of Goodrington had revealed a submerged forest bed to Olive: the very tree stumps that had emerged after the last ice age. That find enlarged her reputation further in the circles that cared about such things. But by Olive's time, more and more was revealing itself too; one century after her family began their excavations. It was Olive Harvey who also first discovered the breccia burrows, and then quickly reburied them.

In those preserved burrows were the restless relics of animals that had lived in the deserts of the Permian Age, 248 million years before, including one creature whose distant grave songs initiated the destruction of Olive's own mind. That was the burrow left by a giant *arthropleuridmyriapods*, a millipede that was at least four metres long.

Olive had recorded in her journal how she'd once sat in the fossil bed to rest while she worked, and lost two days and nights, in which her mind, in her own words, 'unravelling through its own substance and memories,' and entered the kind of psychosis Cleo most commonly associated with a really bad experience on LSD. What Olive had seemingly rubbed against, and become irradiated by at a deep subconscious level, was probably nothing more than a near-microscopic fragment of that which had originally dispersed from the writhing and shedding of some monumental form, that occurred 248 million years previously, when this part of the British Isles was near the equator. And so began another member of the family's inexorable decline into socially unacceptable enlightenment.

Cleo continued with her story and told the captivated Yolanda about her own mother, the tormented and twice-divorced environmentalist, Judith Harvey, who had put an end to her own severe and unmanageable cerebral rout at fifty-nine. Judith had succumbed to what was thought to be early-onset dementia and took an overdose. Despite the great blanks in her memory, Cleo had never forgotten that day.

When she'd been alive, Judith had often reminded Cleo of what Amelia and Mary Anning and Olive Harvey had respectively explored, discovered, and subsequently *believed*. She told Cleo all that her own mother, Olive, had passed down to her: the knowledge that our planet was but one tiny krill floating amongst billions of fragments in a cold, black, hostile ocean of gas and debris. And that our infinitesimal fragment was transformed by a *visitor* 535 million years before. A world subsequently destroyed and remade so many times over as a consequence of the visitor's dreadful whims and rages. Her forebears had all shared the same dreams, because the fossils that they had exposed themselves to were the equivalent of a few smudged fingerprints on the walls of a vast crime scene, as big as a planet.

Cleo's mother would flavour her own interpretation with her background in earth science. Judith passionately claimed that had we crept across this earth in smaller numbers, and not congregated in such carbon-rich cultures, while flashing our arrogant, thoughtless presence into the stars, and had we not made toxic and eroded the soils, bled our faecal wastes and effluents into the black deeps, crisscrossed the ocean floors and mountain ranges with cables to broadcast our infernal jabber, exhausted the fresh water and melted the glaciers, changed the wind and rainfall, heated the earth's belly and melted the ice caps, exhausted the great populations of fish and mammals... *if*... we had not grown to nine billion minds and created such an intensification of teeming consciousness on one small planet, whose neural activity transmitted so far outwards... *if* none of this had happened then *it, the visitor*, may never have half-opened that one eye, down there, where it slumbered.

In the preface to Mary Anning's *A Dark, Slowly Flowing Flood*, the author wrote: 'Just as every God has slept through our Godless endeavours, any God can yet awaken.' Mary's last words to the priest, who administered the last rites, are also alleged to have been: 'What have we done? Oh, God, what did we call out to? Is that thing God?' Not *a God*, but 'God,' *the* God: the ultimate creator.

Judith used to wonder aloud to Cleo, why, as a species, we'd not had more sense than to create the requisite conditions in which that name could be called out by the exhausted, dying planet, and by what expired upon it. The earth now heralded an awakening; Judith had told her that before she was ten.

Near the end of her life, Judith had once begged Cleo to bear no children. 'For God's sake,' she had cried from the bed in which she was often restrained: 'Don't continue this!' Cleo had thought 'this' was the hereditary taint of insanity, but had subsequently realised that 'this' had referred to 'us.' To all of us, the *species*, and our burden upon the outer skins of this little planet in our solar system. In which resided a far older occupant that had dreamed such foulness as the great lizards, the food chain, viral life, decomposition and mortality, and *us* too, around its eternal *self*, and across so many billions of years that our understanding of age bore no parallel to its own. Cleo had obeyed her mother and remained childless.

And Judith always made sure that Cleo wrote down her dreams . . .

When Cleo had finished, she remained unsure for how long she had been talking, or whether much of what she'd said, she'd only said to herself. The medication was strong.

Yolanda was already putting on her sunhat. 'On Friday, we watch the eclipse together, from here, yes? On the balcony. I will come early.'

'I'd rather you spent that day with your family, my dear.'

'Oh, Cleo! You still think the world will end during the eclipse?' Yolanda laughed.

No, Cleo didn't think that. Not exactly. 'The end of us will be the end of us, my dear, but not the end of *everything*.'

She did often wonder, though, if the coming eclipse would herald an extinction-level event. How could she not, after all of those dreams? And one heralded in true biblical fashion by the transformation of the firmament. But Cleo was not entirely convinced by the idea, or by her predecessors' thoughts in this area, nor with proclamations made by the new churches who were far too dependent on *A Dark, Slowly Flowing Flood*, among the other, older texts they favoured from Providence, New England.

'I believe our end will be near total, Yolanda, but with a partial evolutionary transformation of whatever survives. I can't give you any timescale, or date, but it will be relatively swift in earth-life terms. And miserably incremental like the consequences of climate change, surrounded by diebacks we've not seen since the bubonic plague in Europe and Asia. So, I'm giving us, at least, another two centuries amidst the rubble of our civilisation. But those will be times like nothing we've had to cope with so far. I mean, how many of us can breathe underwater? It may really be that simple, in most places on the earth.'

'Oh, Cleo! You make me smile.'

'The world has been changing rapidly and bewilderingly towards a critical mass, Yolanda. Surely you have noticed? And I believe dear old Torbay has a specific role to play in an epochal event.'

Yolanda laughed as she swung her bag over her shoulder. ‘Whatever you say, Cleo! There is so much going on in your head. But you are making great progress. You must take the relaxants if your mind races. The doctor says so.’

‘And you may ask.’ Cleo was not to be stopped, even as Yolanda was halfway through the door. ‘Why don’t I flee to higher ground? But if you consider what the women of my family have discovered, who would want to survive what is coming?’

[Excerpt from the diary of Cleo Harvey]

July 18th, 2055

My dearest Yolanda,

I may not remember to tell you this. I may become distracted, or sleep through your next visit. But as I am enjoying a good period this afternoon, I feel I owe you some explanation so that you can better make sense of the disparate stories that I have been telling you over the last two years; stories about my family and our work here in this bay.

My great-great-grandmother, Amelia Anning, whom I may have mentioned to you during our association, was certain that what she called the Old One, or Great Old One, as she was wont, arrived on our planet in the Ediacaran Period, 535 million years ago, and during the last gasps of the Precambrian ages.

Her methods for deducing this timeline were complex, and involved as much science as imagination, and where the two mediums seemed to enmesh within her dream life. Even with her eyes closed, while away in other places and times as she slept, she still had an eye for the landscapes that she saw, and for the forms of those things that left the imprints she had found in the cliffs.

Amelia surmised that the arrival occurred during the time of the great soft-bodied inhabitants. Those that had existed for hundreds of millions of years, ever consuming each other and recycling their drifting forms. These indigenous denizens of the young earth left almost nothing for fossil hunters to find, because they had no bones, shells or teeth. But she learned that vast creatures had burrowed through the earth during Ediacaran times, and trawled the oceans too; great tunnels and gouges were found here in Torbay and in Australia, though not what left the creases in the stones.

Amelia, however, caught sight of them, the vast iridescent jellies and the great drillers of the planet, as if she was floating among them, or scurrying through the debris of their excavations. And in her waking life what Amelia recalled both fascinated her and traumatized her. These tremors of shock loosened her rickety mental foundations. But the monstrous shapes, the diaphanous swellings of the poisonous skirts, the viscous trailings through the hot green deeps, and the blind squirmings that she tried to describe and paint, were nothing compared to that which blasted through the atmosphere and then dispersed itself in incalculably new forms. The visitor.

The Cambrian Period, as we know, is renowned for the creativity of its seas. Nothing lived on what little land existed. That far back, the maelstrom of creation was still in the deeps, and what wallowed in the watery expanses became varied and all too abundant. But it was our visitor who made these new ways of life possible. What it stimulated into being, about its landing site, crept and leapt, crawled, swam, and burrowed to escape parental predation. There were shells, encasing such young life, at least in these Cambrian times; carapaces made in the image of the old visitor's armour. What was still soft and boneless was mostly swept away, or simply reinvented.

But the visitor, the Great Old One, was not satisfied, or so my forebears all muttered in their bloodless and traumatised states in a local hospital that is now long gone (luxury apartments, would you believe?).

Great ructions and upheavals were emitted as the slowly rustivating visitor, remade and remade again the environment that flooded past its often slumbering form beneath the waves. One such mighty cataclysm was the Ordovician-Silurian mass extinction. The trilobites, brachiopods and graptolites were mostly rendered obsolete for decisions that we can only guess at, if decision is the right word. Human terms are imprecise, for although we share a minute fragment of the Old One's vast consciousness within our own sentience, we are not like it.

This slaughter or genocide of what had either been created, or adapted from the insensate drifters of the fathoms, occurred 443 million years ago, in two stages divided by hundreds of thousands of years in which the monarch of our watery rock rested between its annihilations.

My poor forebears all cited the alien deity's sensitivity to temperature and climate, and claimed that it drew great ice sheets over itself and its resting places following the Ordovician-Silurian mass extinction. It also used a new armour of ice to drastically alter the chemistry of the oceans and the atmosphere above the waters. But the ruler continued to vandalise its own newly created habitat too, and repeatedly, across the next 380 million years, whenever its meditations became fitful, or disturbed. The planet was plunged into apocalypse and collapse in the Devonian, Permian, Triassic-Jurassic and Cretaceous Periods. There were smaller mass extinctions too, and in each of these eruptions of the roused tyrant's rage, half of the species that it had formed or evolved were destroyed again.

Varied evolving parts of itself, and therefore life, were discovered upon our shores by my fossil-hunting family. All of the clues of what came before mankind, mainly occurred in the Devonian and Permian Periods, and because the slaughtered littered their corpses in the bare cliffs of our beautiful, sheltered Torbay, my forebears dug them up. Do you see?

The Devonian was the Age of Fishes. The sea levels were so very high and the temperature of the water too hot for some, like our ruler, at thirty degrees in the tropics. So a great wrath from below was invoked by this heat. Now this is important if you consider the temperature of our own world now. But three quarters of all the species on this planet were made extinct across a slow, deliberate and sadistic cull lasting for several million years. At one point, you could say chemical weapons were employed by the Great Old One. The oxygen was removed from the waters, as the creator noted such a chronic dependence upon that gas amongst its myriad

subjects. The wiping of the slate was also embellished by the Old One's wilful alterations in sea level, by changes in the climate, and by disruptions in soil fecundity. Even great rocks, passing through the heavens, were pulled down by its rage upon the seabed; a rage that our own baboonish antics today inadequately mimic. The fury that destroyed what had been created must have been incendiary, incandescent, and so cruel. My relatives only found fragments of the war-torn carcasses. They had been buried in rubble for 359 million years, but they were still smoking with a psychic trauma at a bacterial and subatomic level.

The visitor covered the world with ice again. It banished the earth from its sight and slept in the ruins. The survivors struggled on. The land welded together its wreckage into the Pangea supercontinent, in which every bleeding and shell-shocked continent came together to shiver in the ice. This diaspora began 290 million years ago. But what life and activity there was heated the planet all over again and melted the ice.

Such was the savagery and merciless genocide of the visitor upon awakening this time that all previous mass extinctions were rendered irrelevant. You could say that the Great Old One came out swinging with both eyes open, and The Great Dying began. The fish, and even the insects, were smashed and cast aside. He called down a rain of stones from that canopy of debris that flowed through the solar system. He opened his bellows and poisoned the earth with methane, rid the air of oxygen and suffocated his own multitude of abandoned children. Up rose the tyrant's seas too and down they crashed upon what we call life. The annihilation was near total. All but four percent of the species of the earth were put to death. My mother told me that his indifference alone had allowed the four percent to survive. All of what is left alive today began life in the four percent that survived The Great Dying.

200 hundred million years ago, and then 65 million years ago, he laid waste again and again to what swam, flew and crawled anew around his throne. And again, he used the climate as his weapon.

65 million years after that final massacre, our species has heated this earth again, and we have become so noisome, noisy and populous. Only the flora, water and the animal kingdom can sense the destruction and extinctions of the past ages, and they have begun to scream that name in alarm and terror again. They know that one of our creator's eyes has opened. Bleary with slumber maybe, but red with a demented rage that is as hot as a star.

As I watch the news on the screen in my home, and as I reel through the data from every kind of scientific observation and analysis that cognitively overloads our poor and troubled minds, in all of this chaos, I believe that we have fatally roused the Great Old One with our careless tenancy. We have begun to wake him with the heat that we have caused. The visitor is the sole creator, and always has been, but we have dared to ape a deity's excesses. So this time his wrath will explode with a creativity that not even the cruellest God or devil, in any of our mythologies, could even imagine to inflict upon its subjects.

This is why I think it best that you spend the day of the eclipse with your loved ones.

I sincerely wish that I, and my mother, and her mother, and her mother, and her mother too, really were all nothing but insane, deranged and delusional old women.

*Your fond friend,
Cleo*

At the end of the dream, Cleo dreamed of the bay. The same dream she had been having for months. Or had it been months? It felt familiar, but how would she ever really know? But from Hope's Nose to Berry Head, she dreamed of the great body of water as it turned as black as oil and roiled like a weir as wide as an ocean.

The thin outline of the sun's silhouette diminished, then vanished.

Stars she recognised and many that she didn't recognise, and many other moving, shining objects, crisscrossed the vast canopy of sky, leaving silvery trails like those of snails upon patio stones.

And when the sun began to reappear the people who had gathered on the shore all called out a name, and their myriad, faraway voices sounded like a small wave washing upon sand before dying into silence.

The horizon was changing its shape.

Soon, it was as if all the water in the world was rushing forward from out there, and in the form of a long black wall. Behind the great wave, she thought she saw something vast and lumpen in shape, that could have been a new black mountain emerging from the earth's crust, rising to conceal the sun again.

Cleo awoke to the sound of screams. Tens of thousands of them. Screams on the shore one mile away and screams on the television screen that flickered beside the balcony doors of the living room. The whole world seemed to be shrieking at the same time.

Yolanda was on the balcony. She was naked. In her waking delirium, for some reason that Cleo could not understand, her nurse had come into her home that morning and removed all of her clothes.

'Yolanda!' Cleo called out with a throat so dry the word sounded like a croak.

Even in the din below the balcony, that now resembled a crowd in a football stadium, or a hundred school playgrounds filled with terror, Yolanda seemed to hear Cleo. The nurse turned around, smiling.

As she stepped into the room the first thing Cleo noticed was the eye tattooed upon Yolanda's flat, brown stomach. An eye that she recognised. She'd seen it around and it was a good likeness.

The wind that hit the building turned the curtains vertical and Yolanda staggered, but never stopped smiling. Her face was wet with the tears of an intense, private joy.

The ground shook and everything in the apartment rattled. Amelia, Mary, Olive and Judith's pictures fell down upon the sideboard, as did the preserved and pressed weeds that hung upon the walls.

The din from outside could have been a plane crashing in a thunderstorm, or the very earth being twisted and broken within a pair of great hands. The sea didn't even sound like the sea anymore. The sea was an animal's roar. Cleo believed most of the air in the room was soon sucked back out through the balcony doors.

No more than a few feet in front of Cleo's seat, Yolanda opened her mouth, but Cleo had no chance of hearing what came out of it. By the movement of the nurse's lips she was certain, though, that a name had been called. And as Yolanda helped her out of her chair and began moving her towards the balcony, either to see what was happening, or to become a part of it, Cleo winced and then whimpered when she saw the long, livid gills where Yolanda's ribs should have been.

Cthulhu

The foremost characteristic of the great old one known as Cthulhu is his enormous size. He dwarfs all living things, and indeed, all spiritual creatures that from time to time descend from the higher spheres. The elephant and behemoth cannot challenge his vast bulk. Even the mighty leviathan of the deeps is a toy for him to play with. He has been called the mountain that walks, and with good reason, for his head brushes the clouds, and each stride he takes is measured in furlongs. When his vitality waxes his body becomes larger, and when his strength wanes, he diminishes in size, yet always he is immense.

It is a curious fact that material representations of Cthulhu tend to be of no great size. This may be due to the utter futility in trying to express the sheer magnitude of this being with any sculpture or engraving. The artists who represent him have fled to the opposite extreme, and encapsulate him in small carven figures of stone, or on little plaques of hardened clay that may be held on the hand.

These figures depict a godlike being who squats on a block of stone with his upper limbs dangling over his knees. At first glance he appears to be humanlike in his shape, but a closer examination reveals that this is an illusion. It is true that he has two limbs that might be said to be legs, and two other limbs that can be called arms, but both end in hooked talons like those of a hawk, and his body is little more than a swollen mass. His head is massive, but as for his face, he has none, only a wriggling tangle of rootlike appendages that writhe about his head as they test the air. Within this mass is hidden his mouth. His eyes are small black beads, akin to those of an insect, and three in number on each side of his pulpy head arranged in the pattern of a descending triangle. The squamous flesh that covers his body is a kind of gray color tending to green, and covered with bumps like the skin of a toad.

It is said that the substance of his body is not like earthly flesh, but that it has the consistency and appearance of translucent slime, similar in this respect to the bodies of the sea creatures known as jellyfish. When broken apart it immediately reforms itself, for Cthulhu's body is sustained by the force of his mind, and as long as his physical form is held complete and perfect within his mind, his body can never be destroyed by violence.

From his shoulders spread leathern wings that most nearly resemble those of a bat. They appear ludicrously tiny—far too small to bear him into the air—but they are depicted in their inactive state by the artists of the little carvings that represent his form. When he flies through the air, or through the airless spaces between the stars, his wings spread wide and inflate to such

an enormous size that they blot out the sun and turn day to night. Each beat of these heaven-spanning vanes is enough to knock down whole forests of trees, or to raise great waves that inundate cities.

Upon these mighty wings he flew to our world from alien stars. His method of locomotion is unique, for when he wishes to travel through the heavenly spheres, he causes certain stars to glow more brightly and explode with great violence, and the force of these explosions, reverberating through the higher planes, propels him forward, as a ship is driven across the sea by the wind that fills its sail.

Inside his vast head, which appears to have no skull to lend it a distinct solid form, throbs and undulates the greatest brain in the universe. With it Cthulhu controls those slaves who worship him as a god and serve his purposes. In the past, by using thought alone he could send his mind forth across the world and call to him the scattered cults of his worshippers. He came to them in their dreams and gave them visions of strange worlds far removed from our own. Some men he drove mad, but the others who remain sane were changed, and thereafter they adored him.

Only the unplumbed depths of the ocean could contain him, and that is where he lies, in the southern ocean on the backside of this world, far from any island or human habitation. At one time in the history of our terrestrial globe this remote region was a continent, and here Cthulhu ruled from his citadel atop its highest mountain, where he built a great city called R'yeh. From his stone house he could look far across his lands and direct the alien creatures that inhabited them with his thoughts. This was before the rise of man above the level of mere beasts.

From R'yeh he conducted wars against an alien race known as the Elder Things who inhabited our world at the time of his coming, using his star-spawn as his army of conquest. Little is known of this spawn, save that each member is alike to Cthulhu in shape, only much smaller in size. But they, too, can control other intelligent creatures with the force of their minds, yet to a lesser degree than their master.

With the turning of the ages, the very pattern of the stars in the heavens changed and became noxious to the nature of this vast being, whose substance is not like that of any earthly form of life. Cthulhu fled from the hostile constellations and their destructive rays by closing himself up deep within the crypt of his great stone house, the walls of which offered him some protection. There, to further preserve himself, he cast himself into a kind of waking dream that was neither death nor life as we understand it.

Even in his unending dream, sealed within his stone house, such was the power of his mind that he was able to send forth his thoughts to his worshippers around the entire circumference of the world. He ordered them that when the ages passed, and the stars once again turned aright in the heavens, that they should come to him and release him from his house, for there was set a seal on the door that he could not pass from within. It was necessary that the seal be broken from outside before he could emerge from his tomb.

But even the gods are not immune to the vagaries of fate. Something occurred that Cthulhu, despite his vast knowledge, had not foreseen. R'yeh and the entire continent of which it was a

part suddenly sank to the depths, and miles of dark water closed over the stone house where he lay dreaming. Cthulhu found his mind cut off from his slaves on the surface of the world by this barrier of ocean, through which his thoughts could not penetrate. For know this, Cthulhu both hates and fears the salt water of the sea. He is a being suited by nature to the air and the dry land.

Yet it is prophesied that as R'lyeh sank when the stars went wrong, so at a future time when the stars become aligned once again, it will rise from the depths. Then the dreaming god will call his worshippers to him, and they will crack the seal on the door of his stone house, and Cthulhu will come forth as of old, to raven the world for his delight.

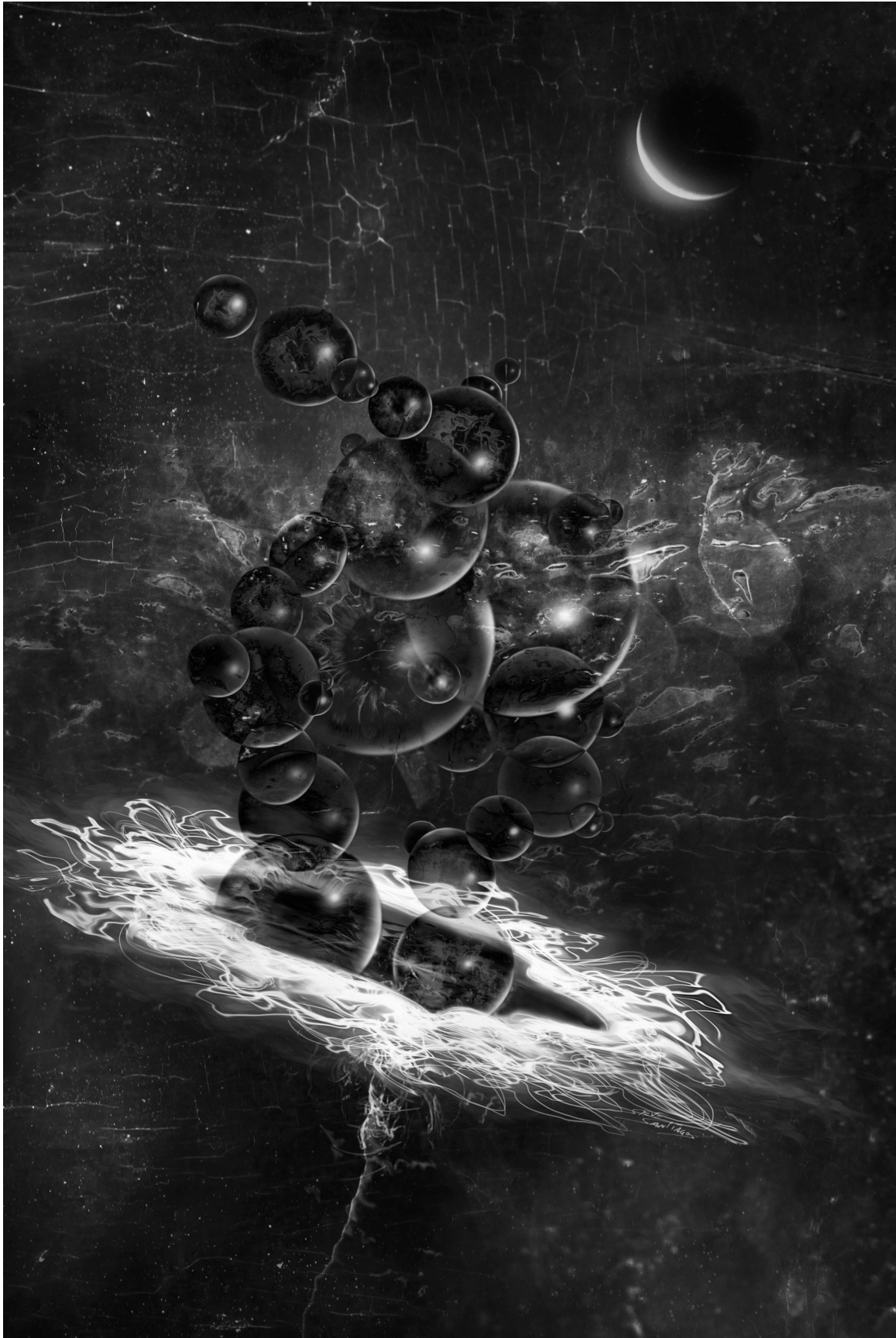
Until this great epoch is achieved, the cults of his worshippers continue to chant to him in an alien tongue so old, its origins have been forgotten, a single phrase that is both riddle and enigma, "*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*," which signified in our language, "In his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming." This led a poet of Yemen, Abdul Alhazred, to compose the following couplet:

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons even death may die.

For Cthulhu subsisted in a state that was neither death nor sleep, but a strange amalgam of the two, yet something else again to which there is no name. In his deathlike trance he dreamed of conquest and dominion. So he dreamed through the ages, and so he lies still, dreaming of the day when the stars come right, and the men of his cults take ships and sail to risen R'lyeh to release their god to raven and slay and burn across the face of this world, as he did in ages that are lost in time.

The center of Cthulhu's cult is near the lost city of Irem, renowned in ancient times as the City of Pillars, but there are lesser hereditary clans of his worshippers in the far-flung waste places of the world, where they have practiced their strange religion and made their sacrifices unmolested for millennia. One is atop the high mountains far to the east of Persia. Another is to be found in a fishing village far to the north and west, where the waters of the ocean are locked beneath ice for most of the year.

Vast is this old one's wisdom in arcane arts that to us appear to be forms of magic. He is said to be the high priest of the old ones, but what this designation signifies has been lost. It may mean that his grasp of alien sciences is greater than that of any other. Yet most of his intellectual power is devoted to the strategies of battle and the making of weapons of conquest, for before all else Cthulhu loves to make war. It was to conquer and lay waste that he came to our world. Only the salt water of the ocean and the malignity of the wandering stars restrain him. On the day the stars come right, and R'lyeh rises, man will lose his dominion over this earth and become a slave race to Cthulhu.



The Dark Gates

Martha Wells

Reja crept through the knee-high weeds, mud squishing under her sturdy but stylish boots. The day was so overcast it was nearly dark, even though her watch said it was midmorning. She muttered, “Next time, we send the Honorable Tamith to do this part.”

Fletcher, moving near silently behind her, snorted.

She had to admit it was unlikely. Ahead, she could catch glimpses of the house through the trees. It was owned by Baron Mille, and had no resident staff, which supported the rumor that it was used for assignations. It had taken Reja a few days and a couple of judicious bribes to discover its location, and she hoped she was right about the current occupant being presently in town. If she wasn’t right, this case might be over abruptly. *Nosy Lady Detective and Her Assistant Never Seen Again* was not a headline Reja wished to appear in the society pages.

She slipped through the copse of trees and crouched in the overgrown brush. “Don’t touch that,” she cautioned Fletcher in a whisper. “Stinging nettle.”

Fletcher avoided it with a hiss of distaste. His ancestry might lead one to expect him to be more competent in the forest than the average human, but he had grown up in the city. So had Reja, but at least she had the benefit of childhood summers in the country.

From this sheltered vantage point, she had a good view of the house. It was small by the standards of the mind-bogglingly rich, three stories of light brown stone with a rather elegant conical turret, framed prettily against the giant oaks behind it. The immense towers of the Mille family mansion were just visible over the tops of those trees. There was no sign of movement in the empty windows or on the lawns.

Reja took a deep breath, touched the pistol in the pocket of her jacket, and stepped through a gap in the brush. Walking across the wet grass of the overgrown lawn toward the house made her feel as if every unfriendly eye in the world was on her. Her only option if caught was to say they were lost; she had dressed conservatively but finely enough to pass as a guest at one of the other wealthy houses nearby, in dark gray pants and a belted jacket of a steely blue to complement the soft brown of her skin. Fletcher wore dark clothes and looked like a housebreaker. There wasn’t anything she could do about that.

They reached the service entrance at the back, tucked into a little cubby on the far side of the terrace. Reja had a set of lock picks, drills, and other devices for the opening of locked doors.

As she set to work, Fletcher stopped her with a slim, too-pale hand on her sleeve. “There may be traps.”

She shook her head. “He has no reason; he believes he’s covered his tracks too well.”

“People do things for no reason.” Fletcher was grim, and Reja knew, correct. Surely Baron Mille, with enough money to buy most of the city, had no need for more power or influence. Reja cared nothing for what the monied and powerful chose to do to each other’s jealously guarded fortunes, and she would not have accepted a case involving that. But the disappearance of Mille’s stepdaughter and his wife’s secretary was different.

After a short time, the lock yielded and Reja turned the handle.

Fletcher pushed the door open, but nothing sprang out at them, or exploded. Inside it was dark, the muted gray sunlight only falling far enough to illuminate a flagstone floor. Reja took the torch Fletcher handed her and switched it on.

They made it through a clean but deserted scullery and a kitchen and pantry that smelled only of coffee dregs and what must be yesterday’s ham-and-pickle sandwiches. Reja checked the icebox briefly and found only prosaic contents. If Mille’s new sorcerer Challis was abducting young persons and using their bodily parts for dark magics, he wasn’t cutting them up in the kitchen.

“Odd,” she told Fletcher as she closed the icebox. “Do you see a basement door?”

“No.” Fletcher returned from a prowl through the pantry. “He’s not doing it here. We’d smell it.”

“Perhaps he’s very tidy about it.” Reja stepped past him and followed the short passage to the servants’ door and the back of the house’s front hall. They needed confirmation of their theories; being a sorcerer wasn’t illegal, it was the kidnapping and murder that the authorities would frown on.

Reja’s client Baroness Mille still expected her daughter Merita and the secretary Osgood Rodrign to be found alive, imprisoned somewhere. Reja would have liked to think that was the case. “Look for papers, books.”

They flashed their lights over the downstairs parlor, lounge, a dining room, and music room, all bearing only slight signs of use. No books except for the leatherbound editions of classics and modern novels obviously purchased for the house along with its carpets and furniture, no papers except a crumpled bill for tailoring an evening suit, paid in cash, and a newspaper on a chair seat. Reja met Fletcher again in the front hall and said, “We need to find the room he sleeps in.” She started up the stairs.

Reja had traced Challis’s path through the city, always in places owned by or associated with Baron Mille. They weren’t certain Challis was the one who had made Merita and Rodrign disappear, but he was the only new factor in the life of the carefully guarded Mille family. They knew Challis had been in Baron Mille’s penthouse in the Vermillion Towers, where the two young people had last been seen. They couldn’t discover why the Baron, who had sorcerers of all kinds at his beck and call, had hired Challis, and why he had made such efforts to conceal his association with him.

The stairs made only the faint and occasional creak underfoot, a benefit of the expensive joinery. Then Reja realized she was listening for those individual creaks, that she had been listening to them for some time. That she had been listening... Listening...

Fletcher caught the belt of her jacket to pull her to a halt. Reja stumbled, gripped the bannister, and swore. She looked down at Fletcher. Some people found his dark eyes, the star-shaped pupils, difficult to read emotion in. Reja could tell his expression was wry. He said, "I won't say I told you so, but this is a trap."

"I hate these tricks," Reja muttered. And she was glad she had brought Fletcher, whose resistance to such sorcerous deceptions was far stronger than hers. They were probably walking in place, or perhaps already up in the hallway, while whatever illusion cloaked the stairs made them think they were still climbing. She fished in her pocket and brought out a silver ball of a glass so delicate it seemed like it might break in her hand like a soap bubble. Reja lifted the ball and slammed it down on the steps ahead. The ball shattered into a puff of silver dust.

Reja expected the illusion to shatter as well, as delicate spell structures would not survive contact with the pure silver. But light sparked as if electricity streaked through the silver dust. For several instants it outlined a door at the top of the stairs. She shined her torch through it and the light fell on the upper hall, the patterned carpet lining the boards. The door faded a heartbeat later as the dust settled. The torchlight shone only on the stairs and the curious darkness at the top that Reja had only just noticed.

Reja looked at Fletcher. "What the hell was that?"

He stared at the spot where the door had formed, perfect brow furrowed, biting his lip in consternation. "How many more spellbreakers do you have?"

"Four." When she had filled her pockets at the office, it had seemed like more than enough. "It was a portal?" She was reluctant to say the word. Fletcher's fay ancestors had used such things for travel to and among the hidden places of the fayre realm, but they weren't common now. "To where?"

"Back to the house." He met her gaze, worried. "Where we just were. But aren't anymore."

Reja absorbed that information. "Right. The stairs—"

"Have been pulled out of our world and partially into another, probably right after we started up them. Whatever did this will be nearby."

"And probably coming closer." She pulled out two more of the silver balls. "Get ready."

Reja flung the first ball against the steps and lunged forward. Fletcher's hand on her back propelled her upward and kept them together. Now would be a very bad time to be separated.

Sparks of light flashed and the door formed above them. Reja tossed the second ball and barreled up toward it. But as they reached the top of the stairs the light faded. A shove from behind sent her over the top step. She skidded on the carpet and tumbled across the floor.

Fletcher landed beside her, neatly catlike. Reja twisted to look, shining her torch down the stairs. The light reached the whole way down now to the front hall, and glinted off the chandelier in prosaic "there's no magical dimension shifting trap here no none at all" fashion.

Fletcher said, "We need to get out of here."

“Search first, fast,” Reja countered, and scrambled to her feet.

The third bed chamber was the right one, a fact made obvious by the unmade bed and the clothes hanging in the open wardrobe. Reja went to the wardrobe first, found a crumpled handkerchief there and stuffed it into her own pocket. Fletcher tossed her the satchel as she headed for the desk. He dragged open dresser drawers as she clawed papers and books into the bag. There was no need to be subtle, no time to cover their traces.

She flinched when Fletcher caught her arm, then froze to listen. Steps sounded from somewhere below, heavy, slapping steps as if a large man in swim fins stalked across the tiles. Reja was fairly certain it wasn't a large man in swim fins. She whispered, “Go.”

She slung the bag over her shoulder as Fletcher went to the window and shoved the sash open. The footsteps below went from a walking pace to a run and Reja knocked a chair over to get to the window, her heart pounding. Fletcher stepped up onto the window frame. As Reja reached him, he grabbed her around the waist and flung them both out into empty air.

Reja didn't scream, only because all the air in her lungs shot up into her throat and choked her to silence. They landed in soft grass and rolled, Fletcher taking the weight and the shock on his wiry body. He let her go and Reja staggered upright, caught his arm, and dragged him to his feet.

Framed in the window was a large gray shape, and if Reja had been given to imaginative fancies she would have said it was a dead man whose rotting body had been shored up with pieces of wood and broken stone and dry brush. It put one foot on the sill to jump and Reja saw nothing after that because she and Fletcher were sprinting across the field toward the road.

They were both long-legged fast runners with great motivation but the thing was simply too fast. Breathing hard from terror, Reja dug in her pocket. She considered the gun, but too many magical creatures were immune to bullets. She whipped around and flung the silver ball instead. The creature was barely ten steps behind her and the ball struck it squarely in the chest.

It jolted to a halt, pieces of its assemblage of debris dropping away. It was a dead man, half his head gone, still dressed in the rotting fabric of a funeral suit. There was a cemetery and chapel a few miles away, Reja remembered. Then Fletcher grabbed her wrist, urging her on, and they ran again.

They crossed the lawn and crashed through a rhododendron hedge. The road was at the bottom of the next field. Then Reja heard the bushes rustle behind her and looked back. She gasped out a curse. The damn thing was still coming.

It staggered through the hedge, wavering now that the deadfall branches and rocks and debris were no longer shoring up its rotten flesh. It was still coming far too fast.

A horn blared from the road. She looked ahead and saw the gleaming silver town car with a four-door cabin just rounding the curve. Fletcher waved frantically.

The car swerved off the road and plowed across the field toward them, powerful engine digging ruts in the wet ground. *If he gets that car stuck, Reja thought, I'm going to be dead and angry.*

As they neared it the car swerved around and presented the passenger side to them, slowing just enough for them to reach it. The front door flew open and Reja put on a last burst of speed, grabbed the handle, and flung herself in.

She scrambled onto the seat. Fletcher landed on the running board and shouted, "Go, go!"

The Honorable Tamith spun the wheel and floored the car back toward the road. "What the hell is that?" he demanded.

"We were hoping you'd know!" Reja dragged the door shut, then squirmed around to lean over the backseat and unroll the window. Fletcher crammed his body through the space and fell across the backseat.

Through the rear windscreen, Reja had a good view of the creature racing toward them across the field. Dirt clods from the car's ruts flew up toward it, filling in the holes and gaps in its legs as it ran faster and faster. Her throat constricted. She cleared it and said, "Fletcher, lock the doors and roll up the window."

The car rocked as it climbed back to the paved road and put on a spurt of speed. Unfortunately, so did the creature. Tamith said, "Reja, dear, tell me when it's on our bumper."

Reja gripped the back of the seat to steady herself. "Soon, soon... Now!"

Tamith hit the brakes and threw the big car into reverse. The creature slammed into the trunk and bounced off, pieces of dead flesh flying. Tamith changed gear and hit the gas again and they roared away.

Grimly watching the horrible thing crawl around on the road, collecting pieces of itself, Reja said, "This case is more complicated than we thought."

When they were far enough away to risk a brief stop, Reja took over the driving so Tamith and Fletcher could look through the papers retrieved from Challis's desk. Once they were near the city, she would let Fletcher take over as she had no intention of driving two men through a fashionable part of town. Female chauffeurs had a somewhat risqué reputation and she didn't want anyone to recognize her and report it to a society gossip column. Reja's large number of relatives came from several different cultural backgrounds but all of them would be united in coming completely unhinged if they read such a story. Telling them that Tamith preferred the company of men and that Fletcher thought sex with humans was disgusting would not placate them. "Well?" she demanded after several moments of silence and rustling pages. "So how did our friend Challis create that thing?"

They had already told Tamith about the dimensional trap in the stairs, and he had said, "A human sorcerer couldn't do that."

"It doesn't have to be a human," Fletcher had pointed out. Fletcher, despite, or perhaps because of, his combined fay and human ancestry, was a great believer in evidence. Reja, whose father had been a police inspector in Parscia, was rather fond of it herself. Her mother had been a

Rienish heiress and a spy during the Gardier War, so Reja blamed her heritage for any impulses toward lawlessness.

Reja glanced at Tamith, slumped in the passenger seat and studying the pages. A scion of high society, Tamith was a lean, knobby, rawboned man, his dark hair tousled from exertion. He was Rienish and as pale as Reja was dark, and it gave his face an unhealthy cast. Though that was more the late nights and unhealthy attraction to sweet liquors, rather than his studies in sorcery. He handed a sheaf of papers back to Fletcher and said, "I just don't think it's a fay sorcerer. He wouldn't need all these notes and calculations, for one thing."

After a moment of studying the pages, Fletcher said, "Maybe you're right. He seems to be trying to figure out how portals work."

Tamith turned another page, and handed Fletcher one of the books. "If a fay sorcerer didn't know that, he'd be a regular wet blanket around the fayre rings. Though a portal and a transdimensional pocket like you encountered aren't exactly the same thing. The only reason to put a portal in a pocket like that..." Tamith looked up, brows lifted. "Is to be able to get to whatever's inside."

"We knew the creature came to collect us," Reja said, ignoring the chill prickle of unease on her skin. She checked the rearview mirror again, but the road, shadowed by the heavy pines, remained empty.

"It wasn't expecting you to escape and rampage around as you did. Which is why I think it wasn't human magic, or fay magic. It was something... natural. Like a spider building a web for prey."

Reja said, "As if something was told to guard the house, but it wasn't sentient enough to make contingency plans?"

"Yes, something like that." Tamith frowned in annoyance. "There's also no mention in any of this of needing sacrifices, or body parts, or blood, or any of the usual to open this portal. Nothing about Merita Mille or the secretary Rodrign. It looks like Challis has been trying to work out an incantation he doesn't understand. There's mention of appealing to some... entity, or maybe deity, or natural force..."

"He has a partner," Fletcher added. "There are two different handwritings here."

"I saw that." Tamith twisted around to ask him, "Have you ever seen that language before? The one in the second hand."

"No, and the letter groups associated with the horizontal bars are distinctive enough I'm sure I'd remember," Fletcher answered.

Reja negotiated a difficult turn onto a broader road. "But what is the portal for? Is Mille looking for a way into fayre?" For generations, opportunists had been looking for ways into the fayre realms, and the treasure and powerful magic said to be housed there, while bypassing the fay who guarded them. She just couldn't see why a man as rich as Baron Mille would bother with it.

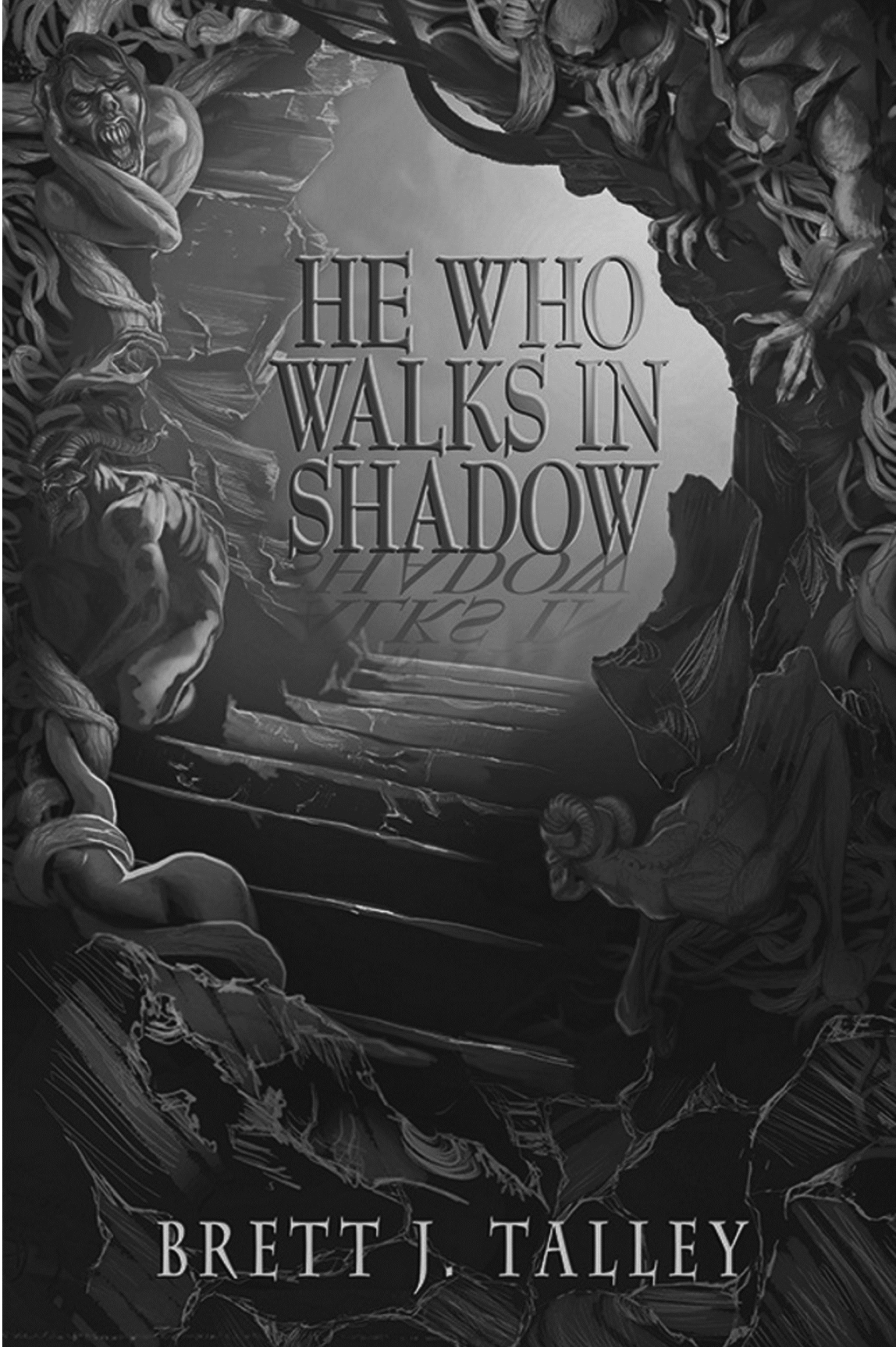
"Hard to tell. From these notes it sounds like they think if they open the portal, this entity or deity will be waiting inside it. We'll just have to find Challis and ask him," Tamith said.

Reja took one hand off the wheel to pull out the handkerchief she had taken from Challis's coat pocket. She passed it over to Tamith. "That will be up to you."

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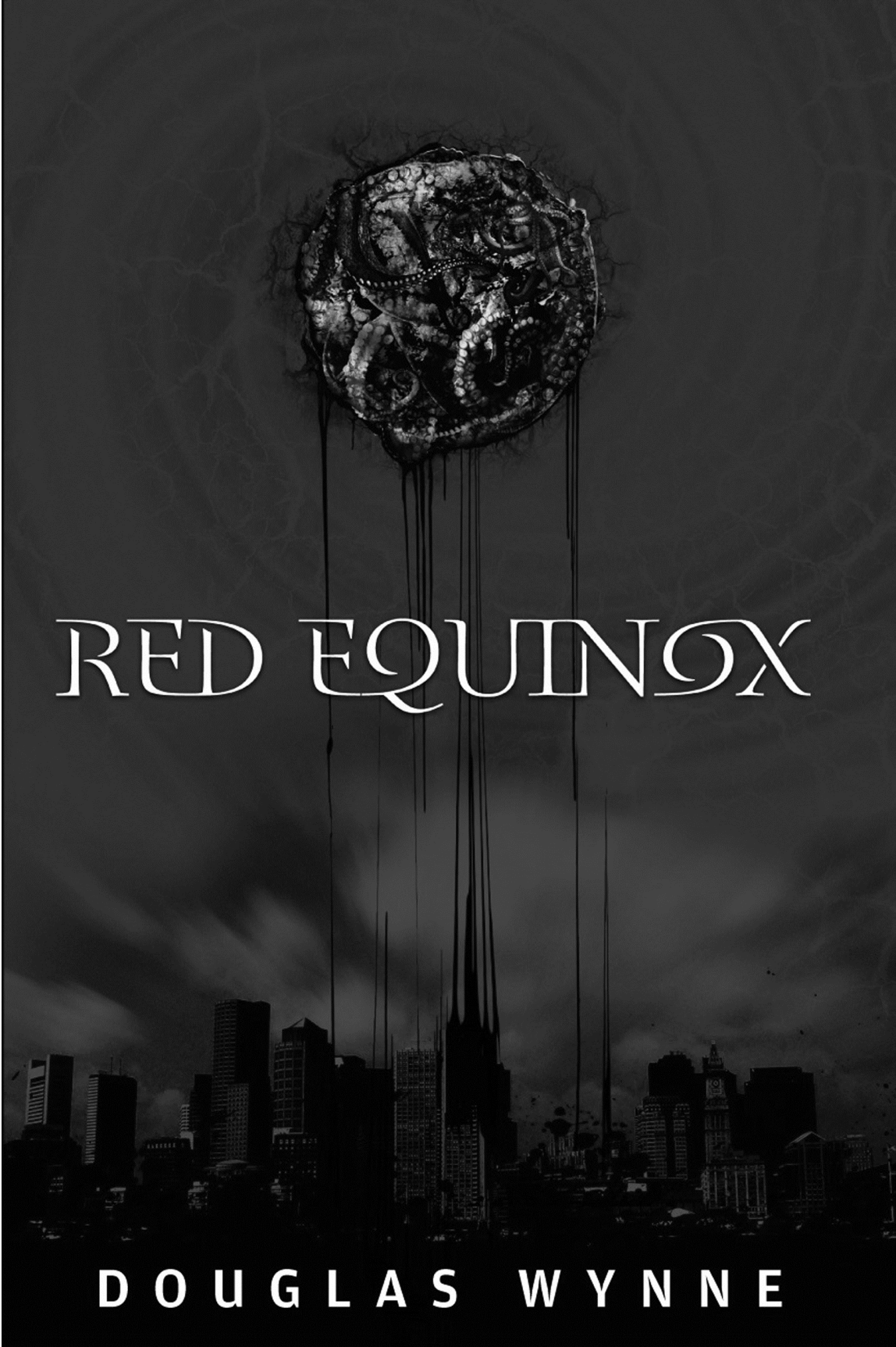




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