

DARK REGIONS PRESS PRESENTS : NEW VOICES OF HORROR ③

RESURRECTION HOUSE



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REFUGEES

The odor of the bundle laid out across the backseat comes in waves that wrap me like the scent of guilt. Time draws me ever closer to the inevitable. Tear streaks dry on my misshapen face, forming a thin film over the painful contortions of my flesh. I sigh, step out of the car, and open the back door. Sand crunches beneath my feet. The slick, dark crests of the ocean roll and bend a short distance away. Remembrance ebbs back to me with the ripple-veiled clarity of languid surf; possibility gapes ahead of me like the far horizon of the sea on that dry, cloudless day that I first met Lynna Marish more than two decades ago.

««—»»

A full-grown horseshoe crab lay wedged in a tiny gully among the rocks. It bobbed in the lapping water.

I crept down the slick boulders, stretching across the last length of space to reach the crab, struggling to keep my feet dry. Today was the first day of school, and Mom would kill me if I came home for breakfast with my new shoes soaked. She hadn't wanted me to go down to the beach, but I couldn't resist on such a beautiful morning. I'd spent the whole summer combing the sand and rocks, tracing Bossoquogue Creek from its outlet by the bay into the woods, swimming and diving, catching frogs, fish, and crabs, while I explored the waters and wilderness around Knicksport. I wasn't ready for it to end.

School meant classes and being indoors, riding the bus, and facing the dumb meanness of people like Lester Smart, the track team star, and Julie Farrell, the class president, and all their hurtful imitators. It brought a close to days filled with seemingly endless hours of solitary wandering. It took me away from the water. The only good thing about high school that year was that our science course was biology, and we would get to dissect a starfish.

Over the summer I'd made friends among the clammers and oystermen who kept their boats moored in the harbor, quiet men who knew the texture of pain and pitied me. Some of them gave me a day's work here and there, puttering around the bay, raking the bottom for harvest, silent and steady, the two of us sharing the isolation of a lonely job. When I was younger I dreamed of owning my own clam boat, but Mom despaired at the idea, warning me not to waste my good grades and brains on such a hard living. Better I should be a lawyer.

I found an airy piece of driftwood, used it to drag the horseshoe crab within reach, and flipped it over.

Dead.

It was so hard to find them alive. Their desiccated shells, legs bundled up tight beneath, often littered the beach like discarded helmets, their bayonet tails protruding behind them. I tugged on the narrow blade, tested its sharp point with my finger.

"*Limulus Polyphemus*. Class Merostomata, Order Xiphosura," a voice said.

I turned, startled, to see a teenage girl a few feet away from me standing on a high rock. She was oddly dressed for the warm weather in baggy jeans, a long-sleeve turtle neck shirt, a floppy hat, and oversized, dark sunglasses. All I could see of her face was her broad nose and her wide, alluring smile.

"Hi," I said.

"They don't use their tail as a weapon, you know," said the strange girl.

"I know. They use it like a rudder and to move around the bottom."

"Oh. You know about horseshoe crabs?"

"Lots," I told her. "Like they've been around for 500 million years. And doctors use one of the chemicals in their bodies to make vaccines and stuff."

"How do you know so much?"

"Books, mostly. And I spend a lot of time wandering around the beach."

"I like this beach," she said. "It's calmer and sandier than the one where I used to live."

"Where'd you used to live?"

"Up north," she said. "But me and my Grandma couldn't live at home anymore, so we came here to stay with cousins. You lived here all your life?"

"Yeah, over on Pequash Road."

"My name is Lynna."

"I'm Dennis. So, I guess I'll see you in school?"

She nodded. "Is it a good school?"

"It's all right, I guess. I'd rather be at the beach."

"Yeah, who wouldn't?" she said. "Well, gotta run. See you later."

Lynna jogged up the beach to the edge of the woods where she turned down the trail that led to the south end of Knicksport near the power plant. Maybe the sunglasses had hidden her expression, but she hadn't shown any

reaction at all to my disfigured face. Almost everyone did. I'd been caught in a chemical explosion while visiting my father at work; it killed him and disfigured me so badly that even when people pretended they didn't notice, I could tell they did. I could see it in their eyes. Especially when the girls at school looked at me. Maybe Lynna would be different. The way she was dressed maybe she had her own strangeness to live with.

I saw her in school, but two weeks passed before we did more than say hello passing each other in the hallway. Everyday Lynna wore the same odd, heavy clothing, hat, and glasses, and it didn't take long for the other kids to start teasing her about it. That was what they did best, after all: lash out at anything different from them, anything that challenged the fragile identities they were shaping for themselves, the lives they were building up out of cruelty and selfishness. It took me a long time to figure that out, to understand that all the abuse they heaped on me, all the hatred and foul will they doled out, had been the product of their weakness and stupidity, not mine.

One afternoon Lynna found me by the Bossoquogue sifting through reeds in search of frog eggs.

She said, "You told me it was a good school. I don't think it's a good school. Everyone's mean there."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Guess you're not having a good time."

"Neither are you. I see how they treat you."

"I'm used to it. These kids around here, I've known them all my life, you know? Some of them aren't so bad. Some of them leave me alone."

"That's not right, either. Some of them should be your friends. Everyone needs friends. Doesn't matter what you look like or how you act. Doesn't matter where you're from or who your family is."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"How about you and me be friends?"

I looked up from the reeds and smiled.

"Yeah, okay! You want to help me look for frog eggs?"

Lynna climbed down beside me and pried apart the reeds. She slipped her hand beneath the swirling water and raised it a moment later, drawing a thin, dark branch above the surface. Clustered along its edge were the nacreous bubbles of frog eggs.

She flashed me a wide smile. "Beat ya!"

««—»»

My Mom mustered a fair amount of happiness and pride the day I graduated college despite my refusal to attend law school. I had earned a degree in marine biology and planned to go to graduate school and become an ichthyol-

ogist. It wasn't what she wanted, but doubtless she was pleased to see me using my intelligence rather than wasting away in a lonely clam boat. Instead, starting in the fall, I would spend most of the next year on a research voyage out of San Blas, studying under Dr. Dagmar Skarsgård.

I returned to Knicksport for one last restless summer and spent too much time walking the town at night, wandering the beach, drifting along the calm, dark roads, inevitably wending my way to the house where Lynna had lived. There I would stand across the street and stare up at the darkened gables in the cold moonlight, wishing over the weed-choked lawn that she would look down upon me once more from her bedroom window. But she and her grandmother were long gone. Even most of Lynna's cousins had grown up and moved on, slipping away from Knicksport with the barest hint of their leaving. Only one or two still lived in the old house, though hardly anyone in town had seen more than a glimpse of them in years. The sickness that ran through Lynna's family was said to be potent and debilitating.

What a waste of warm days and bright sun that summer was. Days I could have been far away, chasing the things that I loved, the living mysteries and cold miracles that existed underwater, the rare species and creatures of the ocean's lowest depths that I planned to study. I could think of no better way of beginning my life than by breaking cleanly from society, leaving behind my dry memories of home, casting myself to the whim of the currents for as long as I desired.

What I found there with Dagmar was an unexpected thing born of circumstance and common experiences rather than romance. She was twenty years my senior and had lost her husband, an engineer, to an oil rig accident in the North Sea two years earlier. Her pain was still fresh and she sought solace in her work, much as I did, though my aches, unlike hers, were timeworn and calloused. Confined to the *St. William* for so many months, I suppose it was unavoidable that we would seek haven in each other's loneliness.

Once Dagmar told me that my hideousness appealed to her because it meant she could never love me. There was no malice in her words, only honesty of the kind we valued in each other as close companions. Her husband had been a strong and handsome man where I was not, and that was, for her, eternally, the face and figure of love. I believed I could never love anyone because I had no desire to leave my secret pains and festering wounds and impractical yearnings. Still, there was the persistence of physical need, and we were well suited to satisfy each other in that regard.

My time at sea, my time with Dagmar brought me confidence of a kind I had never before known. Among the scientific team I earned a good reputation for my work, which often surpassed that of the other graduate students. Within a few weeks' time, the others' awareness of my misshapen face vanished and I became just another student among the group, judged on my con-

tributions to our research. By the end of the second month I felt among friends, accepted as an equal, even, perhaps, admired by some. On the open sea, immersed in my work, surrounded by unexpected comrades, a sense of wholeness took root in me for the first time in my life.

It was then, too, that Dagmar found what she was looking for, the kind of discovery made perhaps once a generation. And soon, I hated her for it.

««—»»

Our biology class started starfish before Thanksgiving, and Lynna and I managed to get assigned as lab partners. For our classmates the project meant doing research at the library, but we already knew just about all there was to know about starfish, so instead we gathered books for our bibliography and then spent the chilly afternoons walking the beach. That late in the year, with the weather turning toward winter, Lynna's clothing seemed less out of place, and some of the other kids had become friendlier toward her. She still wore her hat and sunglasses most of the time, but that was because of the disease she had inherited from her grandmother that made her skin photosensitive and allergic to many ordinary things.

The week our report was due Lynna invited me over to finish it. I was terrified of meeting her family, because Lynna thought they were strange and didn't much care for living with them, but curiosity outweighed fear and my desire to spend time with Lynna trumped all my anxieties. Mom seemed more than a little surprised when I told her I would be going to visit a friend, especially a girl, and she made cupcakes for me to bring. It had been a long time since Mom had been invited anywhere.

The plate of cupcakes clutched in my hands, I followed the directions to Lynna's house and found it on the south end of town, a couple of blocks from the power plant and the industrial neighborhood around it. The house was old and poorly maintained, the kind of hulking, once beautiful place common in the oldest parts of Knicksport. A film of dust coated the windows. The peaks of the third floor gables sagged. An iron lobster poked askew from the tip of a broken weathervane jutting from one end of the roof. The front porch creaked as I climbed the stairs and rang the doorbell.

Lynna answered a moment later and swept me into the dim foyer. She greeted me with a wide smile and a quick hug before she took the plate of cupcakes and led me into the house. Drawn curtains obscured every window and low wattage bulbs burned in the lamps. Every room we entered felt tenebrous and distanced from the outside world. Floors creaked above us with the passage of shuffling footsteps, water ran in the upstairs bathroom, a television clicked and chirped.

At home, enmeshed in the safety of the tired, old place, Lynna dressed very differently, her hat and glasses cast aside, her bulky clothing replaced by jeans and a light T-shirt fringed with delicate flowers of sky blue and corn yellow thread. She wore flip flops on her wide feet and wriggled her broad toes when she walked. Lynna unveiled was beautiful. Her body was slender and firm, her skin dusky and smooth, and her eyes were expressive eddies that looked at me with warmth and brightness. If the boys in our school could have seen Lynna in her house free of layers of cotton and wool, they would have fought each other for her attention. Lynna noticed my reaction, and I could tell it pleased her.

She left the cupcakes on the kitchen counter, then took my hand and brought me upstairs. We passed down a corridor slanted with age, its floorboards soft and warped. The sounds of Lynna's unseen cousins grew louder, but all the doors remained closed. I trailed Lynna up a second flight of stairs to the cold third floor, where she ushered me into a spacious, icy room tinged with a strange dampness. A humidifier hummed beside the door, emitting wet vapors. A lamp glowed on a desk in the far corner, throwing feeble light onto someone reclining in a rumped bed.

"Grandma?" said Lynna. "Are you awake?"

A gargling sound replied, and Lynna stepped closer.

"This is the boy I told you about. His name is Dennis Framer. We're working on a report for biology class. It's on starfish," said Lynna.

I couldn't understand her grandmother's low, garbled reply.

"Yes, Echinoderms. We know that, Grandma. Dennis knows all about the water and stuff that lives in the ocean."

Mrs. Marish spoke again.

"Come closer," Lynna said to me. "She wants to see you."

I stepped nearer the bed and peered through the murk, searching for Lynna's grandmother's eyes. "Hi, Mrs. Marish," I said. "It's nice to meet you. I brought some cupcakes. My Mom made them. We left them in the kitchen."

Again Mrs. Marish's response eluded me, but Lynna's harsh reaction was clear.

"Grandma, please!" she said. "What do you know about it, anyway?"

More inscrutable mumbling from Grandma.

Lynna softened.

"I'm sorry, Grandma. You're right."

Lynna took my hand again, pulled me deeper into the pale light. Mrs. Marish's bulk shifted beneath her blankets and quilts. Her figure was an irregular shape that bulged and twisted and filled almost the full area of her queen-sized bed while her face remained hidden in shadow. She raised a hand, her gnarled, knobby fingers wriggling for me to take it, but it repulsed me. Her disease had turned her flesh squamous and gray, bent her joints into nearly

solid masses, draped flaps of skin across her bones. A massive pearl set in a gold ring gleamed against her dark complexion like bioluminescence penetrating the lightlessness of an undersea cavern. For Lynna's sake I clasped Mrs. Marish's hand. Her clammy palm stuck to mine, and she squeezed back, crushing my fingers together.

Lynna interceded, pulling me free. "Okay, Grandma, that's enough. Dennis and I have a lot of work to do."

Mrs. Marish's arm dropped and she rolled away from us.

"Bye, now, Mrs. Marish," I said.

Lynna took me to her room down the hall and closed the door behind us.

"Lynna, do you have the same disease as your grandmother?" I asked, and right away regretted it as visions of Lynna suffering like that ruined, old woman flickered through my mind, visions of her living with certain knowledge of her painful future.

Lynna's smile wavered for only a moment. "Yes," she said, "but not exactly. It's a very rare condition and it's different for everybody. Faster for some, slower for others. Right now, I don't want to think about it."

"Okay, I'm sorry," I said. "We have a report to write, anyway. Shouldn't be too hard for us. Let's start with radial symmetry."

Lynna shook her head, a mischievous expression on her face. "Actually, our report is all done," she said, lifting a stack of typed papers from her desk. "I did it last night, so we wouldn't have to waste our time on it."

Lynna set the report on her desk. She crossed the room and threw her arms around me as she placed her lips on mine and kissed me. The sensation was moist and thrilling, warm and electrically intense. Stunned I returned the kiss as best I could, having never before done anything like it.

Lynna nuzzled the side of my neck. "We have more important things to do," she whispered.

I placed my trembling arms around the small of her back as I pulled her closer to me. In response Lynna tugged me toward her bed, and unsure, frightened and amazed, I followed. Her lips gripped mine with their soft touch. Her warm fingers slid beneath my shirt, scraped at the coarse ridges of my chest. I inched my hand along the hot, satin plain of her belly, wedged it past the waistband of her jeans. Outside rain began to fall and the evening darkened until Lynna's room diminished to a grotto of shadows and gentle shapes, entwined and swaying in rhythm to the steady downpour.

««—»»

Some nights, as we lay in bed, sated, cradled in the rolling of the ship, Dagmar spoke to me of her dreams and theories, the two things inextricably

intertwined around her conviction that a long extinct intelligent species had once populated every major body of water on the planet. She spoke of legends and folktales, of strange artifacts lost to contemporary knowledge, of whispers among isolated island tribes that suggested incredible powers beyond the scope of science. She told me of the discredited Orne account from Massachusetts and rumors of immortality granted to unknown beasts of the sea. That idea appealed to her the most, I think. Secretly she hoped for some way to be reunited with her husband. She never discussed these things in public, fearing the ridicule she knew the scientific community would heap upon her, and she had hesitated even to talk to me about them until I made it clear that I would not pass judgment on even the wildest of her pet notions.

Neither of us suspected she would ever find proof of her ideas, but then the sea can, on occasion, be quite generous.

We captured the thing in the early morning after a raucous storm that knocked and shook the ship and churned the ocean like a blender. Gabriel and Sorenson brought it aboard in the net they had been using to cull specimens from circling schools of fish. It fought and hissed at them, but they trapped it on the deck, and in a blind panic, struggled to beat it senseless and hurl it overboard. Dagmar arrived in time to stop them, barely able to assert her authority over the two superstitious crewmen, and ordered them to take it below to the largest observation tank. For days she refused to let any of the crew or research team view the creature but for me, herself, and Fawkes, whose knowledge of extinct species she needed, and she swore both of us to secrecy. Rumors and supposition riddled conversation among the crew, and the senior members of the research team protested Dagmar's actions. She refused to budge and promised only to reveal her find before we returned to port.

From the moment I met the thing, I wished Gabriel and Sorenson had been swifter or more defiant. Its swollen, deep-ochre flesh revolted me. The pale ring of cold, jade lips that surrounded a black maw tinged with tiny deltas of bone set my skin crawling. Its form, humanoid, yet also amphibian in construction, suggested some unnatural marriage between man and animal, like the fevered creations of the fictional Dr. Moreau. But the worst of its aspect was its eyes, obsidian wells that gleamed with smoldering anger and obvious intelligence—and locked unwaveringly on me whenever I entered the chamber.

Dagmar noticed the thing's interest in me right away and persuaded me to participate whenever she conducted tests on the beast or tried to communicate with it. She hoped my presence might draw it out. The constant scrutiny of the inhuman thing depressed and agitated me, and I imagined that it was my unpleasant appearance that captivated it. Yet, I agreed to Dagmar's request, unwilling to risk her anger, reluctant to divorce myself from what could

become the greatest scientific find in history. By the final days of our planned voyage, however, Dagmar had learned little more than the organism's basic biological functions, and all of her attempts at communication had failed. Facing a boiling mutiny among the senior researchers, she opened the tank to the rest of the research team, hoping to glean some insight from their fresh perspectives.

Their reactions ranged from fascination to horror, from religious fear to furious jealousy. Chaos followed as rivalries sprang up and tempers flared, and it was with an unwelcome sense of relief that I anticipated our return to port. The camaraderie that had made most of our voyage a pleasure had dissipated and my colleagues now schemed and conspired behind each other's backs, each hoping to achieve their own selfish objectives. The organism's presence shattered the bonds we had formed; the thing's indiscreet attention to me made the others suspicious, and more quickly than I'd have imagined possible, all feelings of friendship and admiration toward me dissolved. Even Dagmar distanced herself from me, asserting her authority to make sure she would not lose the benefit of any favor the creature showed me; I once again became the student and she the teacher.

For the second time in my life, circumstance had cost me my future. As a child caught in a chemical explosion in my father's laboratory, I lost both my happy family and my face. Now I was to lose the life of acceptance and scientific research I had found.

Dagmar had charged me with arranging transportation for the organism to her research facilities at San Blas National Aquarium for continued study and eventual unveiling to the public. It was then that I decided I must leave the research team and pursue my studies elsewhere. The afternoon the *St. William* docked I requisitioned the proper equipment to move the observation tank, eager to wash my hands of the foul affair.

The organism seemed to sense the coming change and even to understand much of what was said in its presence. Early on the morning of the move I went to the tank for one last attempt at contact, hoping perhaps to understand the thing's strange fascination with me before I left and never laid eyes on it again.

I peered through the cloudy streams of the tank, and said, "We'll be moving you today. Dagmar has a little place for you."

The organism floated toward me, its webbed hands sculling figure eights. Gelatinous eyes regarded me with what might have passed for longing on a human face.

"She's going to make you famous."

The creature stared outward, regarding me with an expectant tilt to its head.

"Well, I suppose, that's all. I don't expect to see you again. This has all gone to hell, thanks to you, and I don't have a place here anymore, just as I've

never had any place. Maybe you'll have better luck with these fools. Just don't sleep with Dagmar. She can be a real bitch."

The alien reply paralyzed me. It escaped from the tank, damped and dim, a trembling, gargling voice, but its words a bellowing cry for me to return.

"*Limulus Polyphemus*. Class Merostomata, Order Xiphosura."

Its voice was liquid sound, full of knots of bubbling and gurgling, muted by the water and thick glass, but clear enough. My face burned with a sudden flush of anxiety.

The creature's eyes widened, deepened, as though desperate to draw me into its gaze, as though—my mind quivered at the thought—it *hoped* for something. I returned to the tank.

"Radial symmetry," it said.

Cold invaded my flesh. Strength abandoned me. I staggered toward the tank and stumbled the final steps before I thrust myself against the chill glass and peered with fresh insight at the hideous organism. The thing raised a scale-glittered hand and placed it opposite mine on the glass. A bauble, a bright trinket of unknown richness, previously hidden somewhere in the folds of the creature's flesh or the crevasses of its scales, dangled from one rippled finger, a bright, bloated pearl set in flashing, white gold, a sunbeam against olive flesh.

I whispered, "Lynna?"

The creature burred, "Hello, Dennis. It's been so long, but I hoped you might recognize me."

Its voice carried me back to Knicksport, to that cold afternoon in Lynna's dank and cavernous house, to the muttered rumblings of her grandmother in the dark.

"Lynna."

"Dennis, you must help me escape, again."

««—»»

Lynna left Knicksport as suddenly as she had arrived, and I never forgave her for it. How could I? First loves are always the most raw, especially when they prove to be only loves, as well.

One weekend, hiking along the Bossoquogue, hand in hand, Lynna told me that her family had dark secrets in its past and that she feared she would one day pay the price for the bad things her ancestors had done. Her family was one among a number that lived in a city shunned by neighboring communities for the odd disease that afflicted them, cut off from the rest of the world but for a single bus line that carried meager traffic to and from the rotting place. Her people had been subjected to constant persecution by other communities in the region and by a government that feared and despised their reli-

gion. Lynna and her grandmother had fled to avoid being taken away by federal agents and placed in a camp like so many of her friends and neighbors had been. And, now, she told me, it seemed she would soon have to flee again.

“They’re in town. I’ve seen them around,” she said. “They haven’t found us, but they know we’re here. They’ll locate us soon. Grandma and I have to run again.”

I didn’t want to believe her, but her voice and face showed no signs of falsehood. “Who’s in town?”

“The government men. Federal agents. They’ve been hunting my family and everyone else like us in secret for decades. Maybe you’ll see them around. Maybe you won’t. They blend in, but I know what to look for. Somehow they followed me and Grandma here. Only a matter of time before they find our house.”

“What does the government want with you? You never did anything wrong. Did you?”

“I told you, it’s because of my family, because of things they did in the past. Grandma and I have to be punished for it.”

“You’re making this up.”

“I wish!” she said. “You think I want to leave? You think this is the first town we’ve stopped in and then run away from? I tried to be a friend to you, Dennis. And I tried to be something more to you, because I think that you deserve a better life than what you have. We both do, and for the last few weeks, you’ve made me feel human again. I can’t ever thank you enough for that, for what you’ve given me. I don’t *want* it to end.”

Minutes passed in stillness. We sat amidst the murmurs of the creek and the wind through the high branches of the oaks and the low calls of the seagulls, and after some time I took Lynna’s hand and said, “I think I love you, Lynna.”

I had hoped she might kiss me then, but instead she looked away. She was crying.

I put my hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off, then stood and bolted into the woods, leaving me too stunned and confused to call after her.

That was the last time I saw her, and the last time I thought I ever would see her.

She never returned to school. The next day, strange men in dark suits walked the halls with our principal, and though none of the students knew who they were, I guessed they were the men Lynna feared, burly, clean-cut, chisel-jawed men who strode by with confidence and authority. I went to Lynna’s house after school, but no one answered the doorbell. I went back every day for a week, until one afternoon the door cracked open an inch and an ugly eye peered out from the shadows within. The stink of wet rot and salt wafted out.

I asked for Lynna.

“Lynna’s gone,” her cousin said. “Went away with her Gran’mama. Now git out of here.”

I walked home through the woods in the dimming twilight and told myself Lynna would come back once the federal agents left, once the coast was clear, but I knew that she never would. I made up my mind that one day I, too, would leave Knicksport, and never come home again.

««—»»

I conspired to free Lynna from Dagmar.

Lynna told me of others like herself who dwelled below the waves, thousands if not millions, spread throughout all the seas of the world, hidden from humankind. Her school, her clan, would be seeking her, because they instinctively knew when one of them rose to the surface and moved onto dry land. They would free her violently if need be, but it could be avoided if I simply helped her return to the sea. She had heard from her cousins that I would be traveling the waters near her home and had followed our ship for several days, hoping for a glimpse of me, when the storm hit. Caught off-guard and unable to flee to the depths, she was battered in the maelstrom and left senseless, an easy catch for the *St. William’s* nets.

I questioned Lynna about Dagmar’s theories, and she confirmed many of them, including the immortality of her own kind, who died only by accident or murder. She spoke of her dwelling in the freezing depths, of the curse that had afflicted her family, and the pledge of her great-great-grandfather to Dagon, an old god, forgotten by mankind.

That was the truth of the disease she suffered: life immortal, a home away from cruel men, a place among the vast numbers of her clan. A balance for the hideous aspect her body had assumed as she matured.

I promised to return that night after Lynna had been moved into the Aquarium and help her escape. Taking advantage of Dagmar’s trust in me, I saw to it that no security officers would be on duty. The research facility stood on the coast, and it would be a short trip to the open water.

««—»»

Human again. That’s how I had made her feel when we were together. But then she had robbed me of my humanity, shattered every hope I had of being happy, before she returned to tear down the foundations of the life I had built without her. Lynna and her grandmother had found their safe haven, but now they had destroyed mine.

A sharp gale carries stinging sand into my eyes. I rub them raw. I sigh. Leaning into the backseat, I seize the coarse burlap and tug the heavy bundle onto the beach. Something screeches on the water. I straighten and peer into the moon-licked ocean, seeking shadows, phantoms, monstrosities.

The water froths and calms.

The pale night looks like all eternity.

I scream the secret names Lynna shared with me, the abominable oaths of the outcast, of the damned.

««—»»

Jealousy, hatred, rage, fear. My soul floundered in violent emotions. Lynna had come back into my life only to leave it again. Too soon. And knowing it was her, I no longer found her grotesque appearance horrifying. She was my Lynna, and in my mind, I still saw her as the beautiful, young girl who wrapped her arms around me and gave me my first kiss. I wanted to go with her now, but she said it was impossible. Maybe, when we were younger, it could've been arranged, but not now. But I didn't believe her. With Lynna beside me, I thought, anything should be possible.

I remembered what I said to her the last time I saw her back in Knicksport, words to which she never replied. The memory boiled in my mind. My hands shook as I opened the tank access hatch and helped Lynna emerge. Then as she sought her footing on the slick tile floor of the lab, it was as if my thoughts broke apart and my body acted purely on the fuel of the rage I felt at this new loss.

I seized a microscope and caved in the back of Lynna's skull.

Once Lynna had shown me the possibilities of the world, but twice she had stolen them all away from me. She gave me hope only so that I would understand the true depths of my loneliness. I had no forgiveness for her in my heart, which felt as scarred and calloused as my body.

But when I looked upon her dying face and saw her eyes turning plastic and filmy, my senses returned, and I realized the expansive horror I had committed against Lynna but against myself, as well. I had become those who had tortured me in my youth, a body animated by dumb fury, lashing out at something unlike me, something that had shattered the fleeting security of my existence. I wailed as the last spark of life faded from Lynna's expression, and I wept as I wrapped her body in burlap, placed it in my car, and drove to the beach. Even in the face of such horror, I felt compelled to keep my word, to help Lynna escape.

««—»»

Fresh tears roll down my face.

I pray Lynna's people can undo what I have done, that immortality can be renewed, that her powerful, ancient god can restore what I have taken from the world. And that perhaps, he may find some measure of pity for one such as me, unwanted by my own kind, unsuited for the one being I ever loved. What sacrifice could I possibly make to win his favor?

I bellow over the rumbling surf.

Dark shapes rise among the swells. Deformed heads mounted by bulbous eyes pierce the surface. Massive webbed hands guide them forward. Slender gray fins protrude from the hulking backs of horrible creatures Lynna called her Deep Ones, her family, her kind. I drop to my knees beside Lynna's lifeless body and beg forgiveness, crying out for them to restore Lynna, praying to the unknowable god that rules them.

They circle me. One among them steps forward, fat and squishing, vaguely familiar, its shoulders bent with anger. It points at me with one monstrous hand, adorned by a ring I have seen before, the twin of that which Lynna showed me, the pearl that had adorned her grandmother's hand.

Her eyes, like Lynna's were, are deep, rolling abysses. They are unforgiving. They are cold, cruel, and inhuman. After all, Lynna's grandmother never did approve of our relationship, but hoped I would help her granddaughter get something out of her system.

"I have nowhere left to run," I say. "Like you once did. Like Lynna."

The circle tightens around me. I am an interloper. I am different than them.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't understand. I only wanted someone to be with."

I remember Lynna's room on that gloom-soaked afternoon, the way the cold rain washed across its windows, and how Lynna's smooth warmth felt pressed against me. I no longer deserve such a memory, but still I try to lock it in place, to live in that moment.

A clammy hand wraps around my throat. Others join it. I feel myself dragged onto the wet sand, into the surf, and a cold black world welcomes me.