JG FAHERTY

SINS OF THE FATHER



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FLAME TREE PRESS
6 Melbray Mews, London, SW6 3NS, UK
flametreepress.com

US sales, distribution and warehouse:
Simon & Schuster
100 Front Street, Riverside, NJ 08075
www.simonandschuster.com

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Thanks to the Flame Tree Press team, including:
Taylor Bentley, Frances Bodiam, Federica Ciaravella, Don D'Auria, Chris Herbert, Josie Karani, Molly Rosevear, Mike Spender, Cat Taylor, Maria Tissot, Nick Wells, Gillian Whitaker.

The cover is created by Flame Tree Studio with thanks to Nik Keevil and Shutterstock.com.
The font families used are Avenir and Bembo.

Flame Tree Press is an imprint of Flame Tree Publishing Ltd
flametreepublishing.com

A copy of the CIP data for this book is available from the British Library and the Library of Congress.

HB ISBN: 978-1-78758-409-9
PB ISBN: 978-1-78758-407-5
ebook ISBN: 978-1-78758-410-5

Printed in the UK at Clays, Suffolk

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SINS OF THE FATHER

FLAME TREE PRESS
London & New York

CHAPTER ONE

Death stared at me with eyes that mirrored the mists shrouding Innsmouth's waterfront district.

There are no such things as demons.

I clung to that thought as I regarded the body on the wet pavement. Despite my lack of a medical degree, I had seen enough bodies in my time, both in the morgue and while assisting my father on his rounds, to have a fair idea as to the cause of death. In the yellow glow of my lantern the all-too-familiar purple bruises on Officer Stemple's neck stood out like tattoos.

My lamp chose that moment to flicker. I gave it a brisk shake and dialed up the wick. The flame brightened, although not to its previous glow, penetrating mere feet before the late-night fog consumed it.

"Come closer with that damn thing." Officer Hofferman motioned with his free hand. I obliged, wondering how our local constables ever solved any crimes when their ranks were filled with such incompetence. Neither he nor his partner, a stout, marmot-faced fellow named Geary, had remembered to carry one of the new electric torches the police force had purchased.

Hofferman held a cloth over his face with his other hand, as if that would do any good against the plague, while Geary scowled and did his best to examine the body without getting too close.

Idiots. Worried about the plague, despite the fact that Stemple's body showed none of the signs. No swelling lumps on the neck. No blackening of the fingers, toes, or lips.

It's people like these that cause unnecessary panic.

I could have disputed them. As the son of a doctor – and a recent former medical student myself – my knowledge of the human condition surpassed that of the average man or copper on the street. Enough to be confident the corpse harbored no danger to us. I kept my thoughts to myself, though. Both officers were in foul moods, not just from fear of disease but because one of their own had been struck down.

The moisture-laden air clung to clothes and skin, clammy as a fever sweat. I leaned forward between the two men and placed the light nearer to the body, while congratulating myself that my hand shook only a little.

Not plague, no. Something much worse. Murder, plain and simple. A more frightening state of events, to be sure. Who would kill a police officer? The question brought forth a churning in my belly. Like everyone in Innsmouth, I'd heard the rumors whispered about town of late: not the ones of plague, but the darker ones.

Demons stalking the streets. The dead disappearing from their graves. Grotesque, pale faces glimpsed in alleys or outside windows. People vanishing without a trace.

Stories a logical man would sneer at by the light of day, even more far-fetched than the plague returning to Innsmouth after fifty years.

In the depths of night, though, with the streets cloaked by murky vapors thick enough to hide your own hands from your face, it became all too easy to imagine monsters stalking the streets. At least for some people, the ones whose minds turned to things best left for nightmares and children's stories. As if sun stole all common sense from the town when it set.

The police scoffed at the stories, of course. Attributed the disappearances to unhappy spouses and drinking binges, the empty graves to vandals, the shadowy figures to drunken imaginings and womanly vapors. But they couldn't laugh away murders.

Believe in science, Henry, not superstition.

I did. Only in this instance, my father's favorite saying provided little relief. Demons and boogems might not exist, but the shadows hid plenty of real evils.

Such as murder.

Seven of them in the past fortnight. All with the same mottled bruising about the neck. All with their faces twisted, indicating the men died in extreme pain.

Or encountered something terrifying in their final moments.

How many more undiscovered, rotting away in back alleys or tossed into the sea? Any town of a certain size and quality contained dangers, men who'd as soon cut your throat as nick your wallet. But the plague years had rendered entire sections of Innsmouth desolate, turned thriving neighborhoods into havens for those of a criminal bent. Places where no sane man or woman dared tread even in daylight.

Not in decades had death roamed so freely, a fact that had people on edge, afraid to walk the streets at night. Even in the finer sections of town, the areas considered safe from men with dark hearts and sharp knives, people voiced their concerns, and that more than anything had the council putting pressure on the police to do something.

After the discovery of the fifth corpse, Mayor Waite had called a town meeting, where in no uncertain terms he reminded our fair citizens the plague hadn't returned to their shores.

"Innsmouth remains free of the dreaded disease," he said, the council members standing solemn-faced behind him. "Our doctors assure us these men were killed not by plague but by malice. Strangled, they were. This is the work of a deranged individual and we will find him and deal with him properly."

Francis Bradford, the town surgeon, had backed up the mayor's words with his own assurances, all the while belying his certainty by nervously tugging at the hem of his black frock coat.

Their platitudes hadn't eased troubled hearts. If anything, the gossip grew stronger and the temperament of the town grew worse each night, fueled by tales of Innsmouth's own Jack the Ripper roaming in the fog.

Samuel Waite is a fat blowhard, but he was right about one thing. To follow that road, the one guided by superstition rather than science, only leads to more problems. Of course, even science can go wrong.

My father proved that beyond a doubt.

"All right, nothing more we can do here." Hofferman's gruff tone broke the silence and made me jump. The two officers stepped away from the body. "Take him to the freezer. Off you go, Gilman."

I bit back a snide retort that would only earn me a cursing at best and a beating at worst. Despite how good a reputation I'd built as a man of science, despite how well I did my job, I'd never overcome my father's dark legacy.

Someday, though…someday I'll have my degree and enough money to put this part of town behind me for good. Or perhaps leave Innsmouth altogether, if I could convince Flora to join me.

Until then, I must suffer in silence.

I loaded the body into my cart. By the time I hefted and shoved the uncooperative corpse over the lip, I'd worked up a sweat that turned clammy in the chill air. The body fell onto the wooden bed with a thump

that made me cringe. No matter how many times I heard that sound, it still served as a dark reminder of death's permanence, even more so than examining the cadavers at the morgue.

After covering it with a tarp, I climbed in and spurred the horse, an elderly mare named Fudge because of her dark brown coloring.

One day I'll have the money for a motor carriage. And Flora and I will tool around the countryside in style, while—

Enough with the daydreams, Henry, I berated myself. First things first. And the first thing was to get the body on ice.

As much as I hated menial work when I should be ensconced in my medical studies, things could be worse. My position at the morgue allowed me to keep up to date with my anatomical and medical training. And despite the odors of shit and rot, it was far better than toiling in the factories or hauling fishing nets.

Of course, of late my duties had been more dreadful than usual. I tried not to think about the body behind me, its bulging eyes and gaping mouth silently screaming *No ordinary cutthroat did this to me*. In a short while it would join the others, all of whom held the same expression under grimy sheets.

There are no such things as demons.

For once, my father's words held no comfort.

CHAPTER TWO

Things might have turned out very differently if it hadn't been for Flora.

It had been two days since we'd last spoken and I was looking forward to seeing her, even more than I was to having a few ales and putting thoughts of death and murder behind me for a while.

With Flora's lovely features occupying my thoughts, I never noticed that I'd walked right into trouble until I was already halfway down the alley.

Two figures, one bent menacingly over the other, blocked the sidewalk twenty feet ahead, their forms little more than shadows in the ever-present fog.

"Hey, now!" I called out without thinking and immediately regretted it when the crouching man rose to his feet, displaying a shape much taller and wider than my own.

The man started toward me, his features cloaked in shadows and mist. I backed up a step, lamenting my decision to take the shortcut. I'd been in a hurry to reach the pub where Flora worked and erase the chill of the day, and the morgue, from my bones.

"Look here, I don't want any trouble." My hand dipped toward my jacket pocket, where my father's old revolver offered a reassuring presence. A smart man didn't walk this neighborhood unarmed, with its proximity to both Old Innsmouth and the waterfront.

The figure continued its approach and I made out more details. A cape or short coat of some kind, long enough to reach his waist. Below that, everything disappeared into the thick mists that turned the rest of the world into gray soup. A bowler hat created the silhouette of a round head. The stranger kept his face down, hiding his features, but glimpses of his hands gave the impression of white gloves or extremely pale skin. One hand held something of a vaguely squarish shape.

"Easy now, sir, I—"

I never had a chance to finish my words. The figure rushed forward with a speed surprising for his size. I drew my gun and fired, a wobbly

shot that went wide of the mark. The attacker never slowed. Cursing my lack of skill with weapons, I turned and ran, all too aware of my own poor athletic abilities.

The slap of feet on wet pavement grew closer with each second. I resisted the urge to look back and kept my eyes ahead. The hazy yellow glow of a gas lamp appeared; I'd almost reached the corner. I tried to force more speed into my legs. If I could reach Ipswich Avenue with its lights and regular police patrols….

Police. Call for help, you fool.

"Help!" I shouted as loud as my struggling lungs permitted. "He—"

A heavy weight struck my back, driving the air from my lungs. Rough concrete abraded the skin from my hands and knees as I tumbled forward. My head struck the pavement and stars filled my eyes. A shooting pain ran down my arm, leaving me numb and tingling from shoulder to fingertips.

Before I could recover my senses, strong hands grabbed me by the jacket and turned me over. My attacker knelt above me. I raised my right arm to protect myself, my left still useless. My breath came in ragged gasps that grew worse as a foul odor rolled over me, a wave of corruption that choked away what little air my lungs managed to pull in. The figure leaned closer, giving me my first look at his face.

Pallid skin like that of a fish's belly. Eyes tinged a sickly yellow, with large, misshapen pupils. A stub of a nose with a ragged, pink hole in the center instead of nostrils. The mouth opened, revealing rows of sharp, triangular teeth.

Demon! I tried again to scream but only produced a weak puff of air.

Something cold and wet slid across my throat, soft but thicker than a rope. It tightened, cutting off the last bit of oxygen to my lungs. The mists turned red. My fingers twitched around cold metal.

The gun. I'd forgotten about it.

I twisted my hand around, wedged the barrel against his body and pulled the trigger.

Just before the world disappeared, lost in the deafening roar of the gun and the yellow fire of the muzzle flash, a single whispered word reached me.

"Henry?"

Something struck my head and there was only darkness.

★ ★ ★

My return to consciousness came gradually. The fog-obscured street blended seamlessly with the featureless place where I'd been floating. The same gray cloud blanketed my brain as thoroughly as it did the rest of the world. It was only when I attempted to move that the here and now fell upon me like a wagonload of bricks. Pain stabbed my arm and shoulder, dragging a moan from my throat.

The attack. The pistol going off.

That face!

My body came to life as adrenaline surged through my veins. I sat up, ignoring the protests of my muscles, and scrabbled my hands across the pavement.

The gun. I had to find the gun!

My fingertips touched damp metal and I clutched at it. Holding the pistol in shaking hands, I peered into the fog, my heart thudding against my ribs.

No shadows loomed over me, no hell-spawn waited to tear my throat open.

Wincing at the aches brought on by my movements, I pushed to my knees, cursing the perpetual shroud that lay over the town. My body twitched as a series of shivers ran through it. The side of my head hurt like the dickens. I touched it, found a soft spot the size of a half-dollar. My shoulder felt like I'd collided with a speeding carriage. The cold night air had me chilled to the bone but my jacket and trousers were barely damp, so I couldn't have been laid out for too long. Ten minutes, perhaps. Enough time that the police should have arrived, especially after two gunshots. Even in this neighborhood. But no shouts or whistles indicated the law coming to my aid.

Shuttered windows and empty fire escapes stared down at me from the buildings forming the alley. No lamps flickered behind curtains. No faces regarded my plight.

A sigh escaped me. "Oh, no, don't get involved," I muttered to the empty panes. "Heaven forbid. Let the damn fool get eaten by some kind of monster while you lie there with your cursed pillows over your heads."

Still, what else could be expected this close to the waterfront district? For years, a wave of selfish apathy had been spreading deeper into the city. Gunshots? Cries for help? Best to ignore them. People who got involved in the problems of others tended to have shorter life spans. I didn't enjoy living in the area, but the money I saved by remaining in my parents' old

two-story building more than made up for dealing with the local bludgers and thieves lurking in the shadows.

Most of the time.

One day I'll have enough money saved to buy something on the other side of town. A fancy place where a man could raise a family in safety.

In the meantime, I'd have to endure the ever-growing squalor and crime.

And now, apparently, something much worse.

An icy snake slithered down my back at the memory of that wicked face hovering over me. It couldn't have been a demon. There was no such thing. No Devil, no God. No Heaven, no Hell. I'd been raised on the principles of logic and science, in a house where superstition carried the same weight as fairy tales and nursery rhymes.

At least until my father went round the bend. And even then, in the midst of his madness, he'd insisted his blasphemies had a basis in science.

His actions had fueled my own resolve to worship fact over fiction. What kind of god would let his people die in so many horrible ways? War, pestilence, plague.

Murder.

And if God didn't exist, then by extension neither could any of the other trappings of religion. Including demons.

I am a man of my times. A man of science. There has to be a rational explanation.

A mask? No, not that. The flesh had moved and twisted when the man-creature opened its mouth. A deformity?

Yes! That had to be it. Some poor sod born with the face of a monster, whose daft parents didn't drown him in the river like they should have when they got their first look at his obvious affliction. Instead, he'd grown up unable to show his hideous mug in the light of day and now he prowled the streets between sunset and sunrise, forced by circumstance into a life of crime.

Demons. What had I been thinking? That road led toward madness, something more than a few people in town already suspected of me, thanks to my father's horrific experiments and my own choice of employment.

With a logical explanation in hand, my heart settled into a somewhat normal rhythm and I pushed myself to my feet. I was nothing like my father, even if I did work with corpses all day. And I didn't encounter a demon, just a disfigured cutpurse I had the bad luck to interrupt—

What about the other body? The one the ghoulish thief had been kneeling over in the first place.

"Damn it all to bloody hell." It would be my luck to have the police show up and find me with a corpse. A corpse that was still out there, hidden by the drifting miasma, another unlucky innocent waiting for the morgue.

Or was it?

Truth be told, I had no idea if the other fellow was dead, unconscious, or long gone.

As much as I wanted nothing more than to return home and collapse into bed with a glass of port, I knew I had to check. There was that part of me that had to know. The poor bastard might be bleeding away at the very moment. I couldn't ignore someone in need of help. Unlike the apathetic fools above me with their heads buried in their pillows.

Cursing my misguided sense of responsibility and the string of bad luck that continued to grow longer by the moment, I reluctantly started back down the alley to the scene of the crime I'd stumbled onto. I'd only taken a few steps when my foot struck an unseen object and kicked it forward a few inches.

I bent and retrieved what turned out to be a thick book, heavy as a block of wood. In the dark, I couldn't make out a title. I ran my hand across the leather binding and almost dropped the tome when my fingers jerked back of their own accord. The cover had a distinctly oily feel that aroused a sense of repulsion so strong I experienced a deep desire to toss the thing as far away as possible. Curiosity won out, though, and I gripped it tighter, suppressing a shudder that ran down from my shoulders to my belly.

With the massive book tucked under one arm and my gun at the ready, I moved forward, keeping a watchful eye for movements in the shadows. The book's owner might return at any moment to retrieve it, and this time the results were likely to be far worse than a lump on the head.

A few yards down, I came across the prone figure of a man. No blood stained the pavement, but his ice-cold flesh told me the poor fellow had drawn his last breath. It only took a glance to determine the man's occupation. Rough hands and broken nails, combined with ragged clothing covered in grime, marked him as a dockyard laborer. Not the kind of person who'd typically be the target for a rolling. Or allow it to happen.

Even worse, the man's neck showed the same mottled bruises as the other murder victims. Which meant I'd been face to face with the waterfront killer and let him get away.

"Hell and damnation." There'd be no going home now. I'd have to get the police, which meant answering a hundred questions.

And what kinds of answers could I give?

A dead man. An attempt on my life. A deformed lunatic roaming the streets. All that and no witnesses. No copper in his right mind would believe me. With my already poor reputation, they might even accuse me of the murder and lock me away.

Even if I didn't end up in jail – or worse – my name would be in the paper, another black mark against me. While the real villain—

My name.

"Henry."

The whispered voice, just before I'd lost consciousness. I'd forgotten until that moment.

"Henry." Try as I might, I couldn't convince myself I'd imagined it. The mysterious stranger had spoken as if he recognized me, had been surprised to see me. But how? We'd surely never met before, of that I was certain. No forgetting an awful visage like his. Heaven knew I never wanted to see it again.

Which meant leaving the scene quickly before he returned, either for me or the book he'd lost.

I shook my head at the still form.

"Sorry, old sport. Nothing I can do for you now. Someone will find you in the morning."

The whole way home, I kept glancing behind me. An uncomfortable sensation sat between my shoulders, as if someone had me in their sights. Even after I was inside, doors and windows locked, curtains drawn, the tome safely locked away, I couldn't shake the perception of being watched. I paced from room to room, my glass of port in one hand, gun in the other, peeking between curtains at the empty streets and wondering what lurked in the fog.

The feeling followed me to bed, where I lay staring into the darkness until the harsh screech of a police whistle shattered the early-morning quiet.

Looks like they've found you, old sport.

Not long after, a police messenger arrived, requesting my services to cart another body.

And so began another day in Innsmouth.

CHAPTER THREE

"Good Lord, what happened to you?"

Flora Marsh's voice reached me over the din from the crowd at the Brass Rail. Next to me, Flora's brother, Scott, snickered. Ben Olmstead, the third in our circle of four, patted my back in mock sympathy.

"One of our local thugs had at me on the way here last night. That's why I didn't make it." I sat down, Ben and Scott taking the other chairs at the table she'd saved for us.

"What?" She set three mugs of ale in front of us and then leaned over to brush aside the hair at my temple. Even distracted by the delicate touch of her fingers against my bruised skin, I couldn't help notice the narrowing of Ben Olmstead's eyes in response to her attentions. The pose showed off her bosom most nicely, and it took me a moment to pull my eyes away and answer.

"My own fault. I took the shortcut and stumbled onto a cutpurse plying his trade." I hadn't intended on telling them my story – after all, it didn't paint my bravery in the best light – but it slipped out the moment I saw the look of concern on Flora's face. Anything to keep her attention on me a little longer.

"How'd you manage that?" Scott asked. Unlike Ben or I, Flora's brother had come straight from work and his postal carrier blues stood out among the grays and browns of sweaters, peacoats, and woolen jackets. The Brass Rail was not the sort of place for smoking jackets or fancy suits. No Manhattans or Gin Rickeys. It did, however, serve decent food and ale at prices even a morgue attendant or ironworker could afford, and sat within easy walking distance. Once Flora took a job serving drinks there, the place became a second home for us.

"The damned fog." Not wanting to go too deeply into the details, I gave an abbreviated version of what transpired the previous night. When I got to the part about the disfigured man who'd attacked me, Flora let out a gasp.

"You actually saw him? The demon?"

"I don't know anything about that." Damn. Either the beer or Flora's attentions had my mouth working faster than my brain. Now my friends would lump me in with the other crazies.

"How could you not?" Scott raised an eyebrow. "Whole town's been chattering on about some sort of apparition haunting the streets at night."

"Aye." Flora gave a vigorous nod, her jet-black hair threatening to break free from the loose bun she'd tied it in.

"Bosh. No such thing as demons." I was beginning to regret the entire conversation. Images of that face hovering over me, the cold, wet noose settling around my throat….

"Not according to what scuttlebutt I hear." Ben sipped his beer and wiped foam from his thick, carrot-colored mustache. "Damn thing's been seen all over. Down by the docks and warehouses 'specially. And that ain't all."

"What?" I was intrigued to hear the latest gossip despite my desire to change the subject.

"Where's my damn beer?" A rough bellow cut through the general din of the pub. Flora frowned at the nearby table.

"It's coming! Mind yourself and give a girl a chance to fetch them. You boys need anything?" She glanced back at us. We nodded as one.

"Hold that thought, then."

"I'd like to hold more than a thought." Ben threw her a wink.

"Sounds like perhaps you've had one too many, Ben Olmstead." Flora's retort came with a smile and she sauntered off to laughter from Ben and Scott.

Unfazed by his friend's inappropriate attitude toward his sister, Scott lit a cigar and leaned back, while Flora's flirtatious smile sat like a cold stone in my belly. What did Ben have that made him so appealing to women? And why did it have to work so well on Flora?

"You did go to the police, didn't you?" Scott asked, pulling my attention back to the conversation.

"Er, no, of course not. I've enough trouble in my life without adding the law to it."

"Smart man," Ben said. "Can't trust a copper. They like to hit first and ask questions after."

Ben's words eased my shame a bit. Truthfully, I'd felt more than a little

guilt over my actions. After all, by not reporting the attack and murder to the police I was just as bad as the people hiding behind their shutters in the alley that I'd railed against. However, self-preservation and fear were stronger motivations.

Scott frowned but said nothing. His disappointment pricked me like a knife, as if he'd become the voice of my conscience.

"Callie was disappointed when you didn't show."

"What?" Ben's change of subject threw me for a loop.

"Callie," Ben repeated. "She came by last night. She was rather put off that you weren't here."

"I'm sure you'll inform her of the extenuating circumstances, old friend," I said, tipping my glass to Ben.

Callie Olmstead was two years younger than the rest of us and the fifth wheel to our wagon. Fate had favored Ben's sister with none of his burly size or square features; you had to look close to see any signs they were brother and sister. The quirk of their lips when they smiled, the slight dimple in their chins (Ben's hidden by his thick beard), the streak of independence they both shared. She was fair where he was ginger, pale where he was ruddy.

We'd courted for several months while I'd been attending Miskatonic University, and I'd genuinely enjoyed our time together. But through it all, my heart still pined for Flora, and when the troubles with my father caused me to leave school, I'd used it as an excuse to break things off with Callie, claiming the distance between Arkham and Innsmouth was not conducive to a relationship.

"Of course." He nodded back, the barest hint of a smile teasing the corners of his lips. Acknowledgement that once again we'd reached an impasse. He'd failed to foist his sister on me, but in the end he'd come out ahead due to my absence, which had left him alone to chat up Flora all night.

"You might as well go on with your story," Scott said, smoke dribbling from between his thin lips. "Lord knows we'll forget what we were talking about if we wait for her to return."

"Eh?" Ben turned toward Scott.

I cleared my throat loud enough to be heard over the general din. Trust Scott to remain oblivious to the interplay of our long-standing rivalry. "You were saying about the supposed demon."

"Oh, right. People claim it's responsible for the disappearances. And the grave robbings."

"The what now?" That jarred me from my contemplation of Flora and how I might gain some edge against Ben. It was the first time I'd heard that particular theory. "I thought he was just to blame for the murders."

"That too." Scott nodded. "But the more often he gets seen, the more things are being attributed to him. It can't be coincidence that all the strange goings-on have occurred between the waterfront district and Old Innsmouth."

"People disappear all the time," I said. "Especially in the slums."

"Happening more than usual, from what folks here been saying." Flora set two beers on the table, took a quick sip from the third, and then placed it in front of me. "Coppers don't pay no attention, they don't know what's really going on." She patted my shoulder, her way of apologizing for sneaking some of my ale. Her hand felt warm and soft even through the rough cotton of my shirt, and I had to fight the urge to take it in my own.

Someone called out for whiskey, and Flora rolled her eyes. As always, their deep blue brought to mind gas flames rather than summer skies.

"Be back in a tail's shake." She straightened her short dress, which only served to tighten the material around her bosom even farther, and headed off. I reluctantly returned my gaze to my companions.

"Bone orchard got robbed again last night." Ben stared at us over his mug. "Second time this month."

A chill sprang to life in my stomach and spread to my legs and arms, raising the tiny hairs. I'd heard nothing about it, but then I'd had my own problems. The factory Ben worked at was right near the cemetery, so it was no wonder he'd learned the news so quickly.

"Way I figure it, troubles started further back than anyone's aware of." Scott looked at us over his glass.

"Not this old story again." Ben shook his head. "Strange lights in the sky? My grandsire used to tell us that one when we were too young to know any better."

"Laugh if you want—"

The crash of the pub door slamming open stopped Scott in mid-sentence. All heads turned toward the entrance, where two figures emerged from the night.

My heart leaped into my throat at the sight of them.

No!

Deathly pale they were, almost ghostly in the flickering lamplight. My first thought was my mysterious attacker had somehow found me and this time he'd brought along an evil twin. Then someone shouted, "Shut the damn door," and relief flooded through my body. No demons, no walking corpses. Just two men dressed in muddy…

Suits?

Cold fingers took hold of my innards and twisted them. Something wasn't right.

"What in hell's that bloody stink?" Scott waved a hand at the air and the odor struck me like a fist, an odor I was all too familiar with from dozens of times hauling bodies from the ocean or out of tenement apartments. The foul stench of advanced death rolled off the two men in waves, causing patrons to turn and shout at them. Paying no attention to the curses flung their way, the strangers entered the pub, their motions erratic and clumsy, as if they'd already had a few too many pints.

"God, that's awful." Ben stood up. "Hey, arseholes! You bloody reek." Laughter erupted in the pub and several men tossed papers and scraps of food at the strangers, who ignored it all.

No, Ben, please don't draw their attention.

The men moved forward, giving me my first good look at their features.

I immediately wished I'd stayed home.

Gray, cloudy eyes with no pupils. Fish-belly skin sloughing off to reveal bloodless sections of muscle and sinew. Lips and gums pulled back, exposing stained teeth and portions of jawbone.

Dead. They're dead.

My hands clenched the arms of my chair. I wanted to stand, to run, but my body refused all mental commands to move.

With each graceless step the men took, more of their true nature became evident. Mottled, loose skin on their necks and hands. Holes in their suits where insects and rot had destroyed the fabric. Patches of missing hair that revealed gray bone peering through scalp.

The rank odor grew worse, contaminating my nose with each breath and coating my throat with an oily residue. Someone at a nearby table gagged and ran off. Others joined him, and then no one stood between me and the walking corpses.

Until Ben stepped forward.

"Here now, what's your— God in heaven." Ben stumbled back as one of the creatures turned his way. Ben's leg connected with mine and broke the spell holding me in place. I stood up, grabbing Ben's arm to keep him from falling.

"Run."

Instead of heeding my advice, Ben pulled free and swung at the nearest of the two things. Propelled by years of hard labor, his massive fist connected like an iron hammer. Skin parted and yellowish fluids sprayed out. The creature's head rocked back, bone and muscle showing along its jaw. The miasma of corruption intensified, a stomach-churning mix of rotten flesh and embalming fluids.

Undeterred by the damage, the dead man clutched Ben's shirt and snapped at him like a wild dog. Ben tried to pull away and the man lunged forward, pushing them both off balance. They crashed against the table, which tipped, sending them to the floor. I jumped out of their way and with my typical luck stumbled over a chair, ending up on my side with cold beer seeping through my shirt.

The second corpse lumbered forward, its milky gaze never wavering from me. I tried to crawl away but my feet tangled in the damned chair's legs. I scrabbled for my pistol, which was trapped between my hip and the floor.

The dead man leaned over me. Its mouth opened and closed as if attempting to produce words. Polluted air rolled out of the dark hole. Emaciated lips rode high over yellowed teeth and fought to shape the tainted breath into meaningful sounds.

All that emerged was a wet, gasping sound. "Whhhoochk."

Coughs racked my chest. My eyes watered from the rank waves drowning me. The monster moved closer and the contents of my dinner threatened to rise up.

"Bhhook."

The explosion of a gun filled the air with thunder. The corpse jerked to one side but didn't go down. Two more shots followed, and although the walking cadaver twitched and faltered momentarily each time, its forward motion never halted.

Then I had my own pistol free. I raised it just as the monster reached for me, hands extended, clutching fingers close enough for me to see dark earth under cracked nails. I pulled the trigger without aiming. The first

shot took the creature in the shoulder. I fired again and a chunk of flesh and bone flew away from the thing's skull.

Still it came at me!

Gritting my teeth, I gripped the gun with both hands and pulled the trigger over and over, firing until the chambers clicked empty.

Skin and bone rained down on me, accompanied by a shower of vile fluids from what remained of its head. The body collapsed at the knees and fell atop me, pinning me to the floor. I cried out and kicked at it, desperate to be free of the thing. With a final push, I squirmed away and crawled to a nearby table.

A chorus of shouting reached me through the ringing in my ears. I pulled myself up and staggered over to where a crowd of people stood watching Scott and Ben fight a losing battle against the other dead man. Several of the men had their guns drawn, trying to get a clear shot through the tangle of arms and legs.

Ben cried out as the creature grabbed his arm and twisted. He battered his other fist against the thing's head and it snapped at him with a sound like two rocks struck together. Scott grabbed it by the shoulders and pulled. It turned, foamy saliva dripping from its mouth, and with surprising speed wrapped its hands around Scott's throat. The two of them rolled off Ben, who clutched his injured arm to his chest and cursed.

"Shoot it!" I shouted. No one moved. No one even looked my way. Cursing, I pushed to the front and raised my gun.

Click-click.

Empty!

I shoved a burly dockworker forward. "Shoot the damned thing! Aim for the head."

The man glanced at me with wide eyes but didn't raise his arm.

"Blast you all to hell." I grabbed the pistol from his hand, raised it up.

Just in time to see the creature dig its nails into Scott's face and tear it away.

Scott howled in agony, his cries quickly degenerating into choking coughs. Blood sprayed in a wide fan that painted his attacker in shades of red. The sudden drenching didn't slow it. Bony fingers found Scott's eyes, which popped like half-boiled eggs. Scott's body gave a massive shudder and went still.

The creature turned and looked at me, blood and gore dripping from its face. My finger tightened on the trigger.

"Bastard!" A blur of black and white shot past and I just managed to stop myself from firing as Flora leaped onto the creature, clawing and kicking like a crazed harpy.

The monster batted her hands away and bit her just above the wrist. She screamed, and that cry broke the paralysis holding the crowd in place. Two men rushed forward and pulled her away. The moment she was clear I stepped up and put two bullets into its wretched face. The corpse's head exploded, sending vile fragments in all directions. The body gave a single twitch and went still.

"Scott."

I turned at Flora's voice and managed to grab her as she broke free and tried to run back to her brother.

"You don't want to see him." I wrapped my arms around her. She kicked and punched but I held tight, even when her foot found my shins. She twisted to one side and I pulled her back, but I wasn't fast enough.

She let out a moan and went limp in my arms.

I managed to get her to one of the few chairs left standing before she slipped completely from my grasp.

"She all right?" Abel Smith, who'd owned the Brass Rail for as long as anyone could remember, peered down at me.

"I pray so." I bent to the wound. It bled steadily but slowly, assuring me the creature's teeth hadn't opened any major vessels. She'd need stitching, but not too much.

"Fetch a doctor," I told Abel. "And some clean rags and whiskey."

"Lickity split." The ex-sailor limped off, his wooden leg thudding a steady beat on the floor.

"Flora. Wake up. C'mon." I patted her cheeks, wishing I had some smelling salts. Flora groaned and turned her head, but her eyes remained closed.

"Holy Mother of God. Henry, come here. Hurry."

I glanced over my shoulder. Several men were kneeling around the bodies and Ben was waving for me to join them.

"Hold your horses," I muttered. I looked back at Flora. She was in no immediate danger. Leaving her alone for a minute wouldn't hurt. I took out my handkerchief and pressed it against the gash in her arm.

"I'll be right back," I whispered to her. Wondering what could be so urgent, and feeling more than a little sick at the thought of seeing Scott's mangled remains, I made my way to where Ben waited with an anxious expression.

"I've got to wash Flora's—"

"You've got to see this first." Ben took my arm and dragged me forward. "Look." He pointed at the two bodies.

I didn't want to. I'd seen more than enough of the walking corpses to last a lifetime, and the short glimpse I'd had of my old friend still lingered vividly in my mind's eye. Another would be too awful to bear. Just moments before, Scott Marsh had been alive and happy. Now he was nothing more than a cold lump of flesh, torn to pieces and sprawled in a puddle of his own blood. Not the way a good man should die, and certainly not a friend. If not for Ben's insistence, I would have returned to Flora's side without even casting my eyes downward.

But I did look, sliding my gaze past poor Scott as fast as possible. Then I saw what had Ben so frantic and all other thoughts tumbled away, carried off by a flood of terror worse than any I'd ever experienced.

Within the shattered remains of the man's face were abnormal fibers ranging from strands as thin as sewing thread to cords the thickness of shoelaces. Unlike the pale, rotten flesh around them, the color of the foreign tissue was more yellowish-green than gray or white. Some of them, damaged by my bullets, oozed black fluids.

Curiosity, ever my bane, trumped fear and I crouched down. With my face just above the wounds, I discerned a salty, putrid odor beneath the stench of decay and death, an odor oddly reminiscent of the fishing wharfs in the afternoon sun while the ships were unloading.

One of the alien filaments twitched and the man's jaws gave a half-hearted snap, closing with a hollow clack.

I fell back, my hands slipping and sliding in cold fluids. Everything around me grew hazy and the room tilted. I fought a losing battle to retain my consciousness. As blackness closed in around me, one last thought screamed in my head.

Demon!

CHAPTER FOUR

"I know what you're thinking."

Grateful for any reason to look away from the depressing scene playing out before me, I turned toward Ben.

"And what might that be?"

Ben nodded his chin toward where Flora stood by the shrouded body of her brother. After much arguing, I'd agreed to sneak her into the morgue after hours so she could spend a few minutes with Scott before he got embalmed in the morning. I'd allowed Ben to accompany us because I feared she might get hysterical again and I'd need his help to drag her out.

"It's not your fault, sport."

I bit my lip, a habit I'd picked up at some point during the two days since Scott's death. How could Ben say that? It most definitely was my fault, and none of Ben's repeated assurances to the contrary would change my mind. Not because I hadn't been able to kill the monster in time to prevent Scott's death, but because none of the previous night's events would have happened if the two things people had taken to calling the Dead Men hadn't shown up.

Looking for me.

"Bhhook."

There'd been no mistaking the word the second time. The creature wanted a book. And I had a terrible certainty which book the thing wanted.

The one dropped by another monster. The one I'd foolishly brought home after my attack. Currently it resided in a locked cabinet in my house. I'd meant to take it out and have a look at it, but so far there hadn't been any time.

It must be important. That thing sent those creatures after me to get it back. It knew I had it. And it knew where to find me.

I couldn't help stealing glances at the other side of the room. I half expected the two corpses to stand up, their shrouds falling away to reveal destroyed, bloodless faces, muscles propelled by inhuman tissue….

Stop it!

I forced my gaze back to Flora. Focus on the here and now. The real, not the imaginary.

Even in her mourning clothes, Flora cast a spell that tugged at my heart. A simple black dress that probably cost her a week's salary. A matching hat and veil hid her face and blended into her midnight hair, giving her the appearance of a shadow person, a being composed of pure grief temporarily granted permission to walk the earth. Beneath the veil her eyes were red and swollen, her cheeks stained with tears. Scott had been her only living relative and they'd been near inseparable despite their vastly different temperaments.

In many ways, she and Scott were the exact opposites of Ben and Callie. Flora was the fire to Scott's cool water, a tornado of energy who made sure Scott didn't spend all his time at home, reading or drawing. Callie served as a calming influence on her brother, whose temper and headstrong nature often got him into trouble. Ben lived for beer and always had a ribald joke or entertaining tale at the ready, while Callie preferred the quiet of a library or study, a warm cup of tea at her side.

More than once I'd tried to convince Scott he should ask Callie on a date, but he showed no interest in her nor any other woman. In that respect he was as stubborn as his sister, whose tenaciousness was on full display when she insisted on visiting the morgue despite her own injury, which left her arm in a sling.

The wound worried me no end. I'd gotten a good look at it when I helped her change the bandage earlier that morning. Purple and yellow bruising surrounded the angry red and black tracks where the doctor had closed the hole in her flesh with twenty stitches, in between sips from his flask.

After wrapping a clean cloth around her arm and assuring myself – and her – that the doctor had done a better than decent job, I put on my sternest expression and attempted to convince her she should remain at home. Of course, it did no good.

"Either you'll take me there or I'll go myself and kick the bloody door down." Blue fire flashed in her eyes and her body tensed, like a great cat about to strike.

Ben shot me a look over her head and I nodded. Better to let her make the visit and then go home than spend half the evening in an argument we

were bound to lose anyhow. Because when it came to Flora, Ben and I always ended up giving in. We were both too smitten not to.

And that will eventually lead to trouble.

She reached out and rested a hand against Scott's chalk-white arm. Emotions churned inside me. Her loss was pure and guileless, my own dreadfully complicated. Scott had been more than a friend. He'd been a buffer. Anytime he wasn't with us, Ben and I always ended up in a tense competition for Flora's attention.

Shame crept up my neck in a warm wave. At a time like this, I shouldn't be thinking about my own desires. I couldn't help it, though. All day I'd found my brain returning to questions inappropriate for a time of mourning. What would happen to my friendship with Ben if Flora chose one of us over the other? Or decided to date us both to see who she preferred?

Worse, what if she rejected our advances altogether for those of another suitor?

If there was to be a competition, I'd need to step up and throw my hat in the ring before Ben – or anyone else – did. But if I made my move too soon I might come off as a cad and ruin any chance to win her heart.

Blast it! Now's the time to be a friend. Flora needed a shoulder to cry on, not a date for the theater. In fact, perhaps I should encourage Ben's not-so-subtle—

The door to the morgue swung open with a bang and all three of us jumped. Two men entered unannounced from the front office.

"Don't move," one of them called out.

I caught sight of their blue uniforms and my heart plummeted into my stomach. Police, and they already held their batons in their hands.

Damn it to hell. Now there'd be trouble. Not for Ben and Flora; they'd get a lecture about being in the morgue after hours but no one would go too hard on them because of Flora's status as a grieving family member.

I, on the other hand, would likely get a serious reprimand from the council for abusing my privileges and bringing civilians into the morgue outside of regular autopsy viewings. I might even lose my job, which I could ill afford.

Before I could say anything, Inspector Patrick Flannery entered. He'd been heading up the investigation into the murders. Flannery wore a gray suit and a black derby hat, the same clothes every day, yet they never

looked wrinkled or dirty. Perhaps he had a closet filled with identical suits.

"Henry Gilman, come with us." Flannery's narrowed eyes bored into mine. Beneath his thick handlebar mustache, his lips tightened and his jaw clenched. The two officers stepped forward, batons in hand and matching scowls on their faces.

"Me?" A sudden image came to mind. A dead body on the sidewalk, its throat covered in circular bruises. Had they somehow made a connection to me? I'd said nothing about it the night before, when the police finally arrived at the pub following Scott's murder.

"Shut yer damn pie hole and move." One of the officers grabbed my arm and I pulled away. The officer raised his baton and Flora let out a gasp. Then her temper asserted itself.

"What's all this about? We're paying respects to my dead brother and you come barging in like we're criminals."

"Not you, ma'am. I'm here for him." Flannery pointed at me. "Appears the apple don't fall far from the crazy tree."

The inspector's words gut-punched me. For a moment, the world swam around him and I fought to breathe.

The dead men in the pub…they think I….

"No." The denial came out in a whisper. My body went weak and I offered no resistance when the two officers hauled me toward the exit. "No, I didn't…it wasn't me."

"We'll see about that."

Everything went gray for a few seconds and then cold air on my skin brought me back to my senses. I would have stumbled down the stairs to the sidewalk and the waiting paddy wagon if not for the officers holding me up. The faces of the passersby were blurred, their hushed, startled voices blending into wordless murmurs overwhelmed by Flannery's words repeating in my head.

"The apple don't fall far from the crazy tree."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Dead people don't walk into bars and start fights."

Inspector Flannery tilted back in his chair and lit a cigar, his third one since he'd entered the interrogation room. He blew a cloud of vile-smelling smoke my way and then let the chair fall forward with a bang.

A ragged cough escaped me and I turned my head as far as I could. Best I could judge, I'd been subject to Flannery's rude manners and hostile attitude for going on two hours. We'd arrived at headquarters after a bruising ride in the wagon, where every bump in the road slammed my back into the metal wall. I'd been brought to a tiny room that contained nothing but a table and two chairs. A beefy officer who stunk like he hadn't bathed in days chained me to one of the chairs and then left me alone. After several minutes, Flannery had entered, cigar in mouth and pen in hand.

And the questions began.

Why were you there? What did you see? Why did they only attack you and your friends? What were they? What-what-why-why?

I had answered as best I could, when not fighting for breath in the polluted air. Flannery didn't stop his inquiries, but more than once his bushy eyebrows went up, and he frequently shook his head while scratching notes into a tiny pad.

Now, as I prepared myself to answer the same questions for the third time, I began to suspect it didn't matter what I said. Flannery would never believe I had nothing to do with the queer events at the Brass Rail. He'd keep going until I either broke or died from lack of air.

"I know that as…well as you." My words came out in a gasp as I struggled to breathe. I wished my hands were free so I could wave the noxious cloud away. "Doesn't change the fact…that it happened."

Flannery tapped his pencil against the rough, stained surface of the table and stared, his eyes cold and calculating. The uncomfortable silence stretched on, and I found my attention drifting, captured by the thin

line of gray spiraling up from his cigar. Up and up, expanding into an amorphous blob as it neared the ceiling, where it—

"Heard you also had some sort of run-in the night before."

My body jerked. Damned if I hadn't nearly drifted off, lulled by the hypnotic motion of the smoke and the long pause.

He wanted me off guard.

Careful, Henry. This one's smarter than he lets on.

I took a moment to collect my thoughts before answering. How had Flannery found out? Then I remembered the officers questioning Ben and Flora and everyone else in the pub the previous night. One of my companions must have mentioned my altercation in the alley. I cursed my loose lips. Hopefully, they'd kept quiet about the nature of my attacker and the dead body.

"Yes." I wondered how much to tell. Not all of it. That would land me in the nuthouse. But I couldn't pretend it didn't happen. I still bore the marks of the struggle. "I got caught by surprise. Bastard came out of the fog. Roughed me up but I took a shot at him and he ran off."

"Why didn't you say something last night?"

"No one asked. Besides, one has nothing to do with the other."

Flannery frowned, then his face relaxed and he leaned back. I did the same, expecting another lungful of fumes to be blown my way. Once again Flannery surprised me.

"How did you do it?"

"What?" The line of questioning made no sense. "Do what?"

"You know damn well what." The words exploded from Flannery and he slammed his meaty palms down on the table, sudden rage twisting his features. "You built those bloody abominations! Stitched the pieces together, filled them with parts from the bodies you stole and turned them into walking nightmares. You're a damned lunatic, just like your father."

The violence of his words rocked me back in the chair and I nearly lost my balance in the process.

"No."

"Can it, Gilman. I'm onto you. Decided to follow the family business, did you? I always knew you were an odd stick. Spending all your time playing with the dead. What kind of man does that? Oh, yes, that's right. Your father."

"I didn't do it." I shook my head. "I'm not like him."

"We'll see about that. Meantime, you can cool your heels in the slammer for a while."

Flannery's fist caught me just as I opened my mouth to protest his accusations again. The world exploded in colored lights and a second pain blossomed in the back of my head. Everything tilted and went dark. When my vision cleared, I was sideways on the floor, Flannery's mustachioed face looming over me.

"Next time it'll be my stick doing the talking. Get him out of here."

Flannery disappeared and the two nameless officers from the morgue took his place. One of them righted the chair and unlocked the chains. Then the other heaved me up by the arms, giving my shoulders a good twist in the process. They half led, half dragged me down a flight of stairs to the lockup and shoved me into an empty cell.

The taller of the officers rolled the door closed and the iron bars slid home with a bang.

I waited until the officers left before climbing to my feet. A quick glance showed the cell barren except for a chamber pot in one corner, which delivered an odor strongly suggesting it hadn't been emptied since the last occupant used it. No window to freshen the air or relieve the darkness. The only light came from a single torch flickering near the stairs.

My examination of my surroundings over, I took a seat on the far side of the cell, putting as much distance as possible between my nose and the awful smell. The damp cold of the stone floor and wall soaked through my clothes and numbed the aches in my body. I wished it would travel through me to my lips, which were swollen and split.

It didn't take long for the silence to become more of a torture than my throbbing face. With no companions other than the stench and my pain, I closed my eyes and tried to focus on positive thoughts rather than imagine the vermin that might be sharing my cell. Ben and Flora would surely be working on getting me released. The police had no evidence to back up Flannery's accusations.

He could still railroad you.

Yes, he could. I pictured him meeting with the council, telling them I couldn't be trusted.

"He's got the skills. Almost a doctor, he is. Who's to say he didn't decide to get revenge for what happened to his father."

That scenario chilled me more than the damp stone. Flannery would most certainly bring up the family history.

"It wouldn't be the first time a Gilman decided to play God, now would it? Medicine or witchcraft or both, it has to be him."

With those reminders fresh in their heads, the council might decide better safe than sorry. Lock me away same as they did my father. Guilty by bloodline. Let me rot in jail or the asylum until I, too, perished.

I can't let that happen. There must be a way to prove my innocence.

Thoughts and counter-thoughts fought each other in my head, writhing and tangled like a mass of eels. My temples throbbed from their actions and I pressed my hands to my forehead.

You can't bring the dead back to life. What my father did only proved that.

So then how was it done? What were those queer fibers in their bodies, the ones the police seemed happy to ignore? And what about the demon-thing that attacked me in the alley?

At some point, it all became too much for my mind, which shut down. I drifted off.

And I dreamed.

CHAPTER SIX

"Your mother was dying."

My father's eyes brimmed with tears, his wretched expression one I'd seen far too often in recent months, both on his face and when I looked in the mirror. A far cry from his usual dour countenance. Seeing him like that – Dr. Silas Gilman, the man who never showed any emotion – was almost worse than watching my mother twist and groan from the damned cancer eating at her insides. Because crying signified hopelessness.

The same hopelessness that had driven my father to commit the most heinous crime in Innsmouth's history.

He'd done it to keep his wife alive, and for that I could never fault him. But even as a young boy I understood that my father's actions went against more than just the laws of the town. They went against the laws of man, nature, and God.

And now he would be locked away forever because of what he'd done.

"Listen to me." Warm, strong hands – the hands of a healer, not a murderer – touched my cheeks. "I broke the law, and I'm being punished for it. But that doesn't mean I was wrong. I never hurt anyone. People are just afraid of what they don't understand. Believe in science, Henry. Not superstition. Promise me."

I shook my head. At ten years of age, all I knew was that my father had gone crazy, had done unspeakable things, things no doctor should ever do. And he'd done them to my mother.

Everyone in town hated him, and many of them hated me too. Called me the son of Frankenstein, after the character in Mary Shelley's book, whenever I went to the store or approached the courthouse. Those who didn't curse me stared at me with pity in their eyes while they crossed themselves or muttered prayers as I passed by.

My father tried to draw me close for a final embrace but I pulled away. "Leave me alone."

"I love you, Henry. Don't ever forget that." He reached out again,

but two police officers took him by the arms and yanked him to his feet. "Henry…."

Anger and fear and sadness waged a war inside me. Tears clouded my vision and blurred my last sight of him, as the officers dragged him from the courtroom to the paddy wagon waiting to take him to his new home: Arkham Sanitarium, where he'd spend the rest of his natural life locked away with the lunatics and mentally feeble.

The few people remaining in the courtroom, including my maternal grandparents, who would be taking over my care, moved to the windows or doorway to watch. Outside, hundreds of townsfolk had gathered to witness the event. I heard their angry cries as the doors opened. Pictured my father cringing away. He'd helped so many of them and now they'd turned on him.

Because he deserved it, part of me said. Another, much smaller, part asked, Did he?

Sitting alone on a wooden bench, I let my tears flow. Things were so confusing! I knew what 'imprisonment for life' meant. I'd never see my father again. That didn't seem right to me. At the same time, I wanted him to go away forever for the awful thing he'd done. That I'd had to witness.

"People never go away forever, my little one."

I turned, my heart soaring at the sound of my mother's voice. She wasn't dead! She—

Stood alone in a foggy graveyard. A black square of soil separated us. I recognized it as her burial plot, where I'd stood just a week before while they interred her. She wore the blue dress she'd been laid to rest in, but unlike that day, her face was healthy and full and she smiled the beautiful smile I remembered so well.

"Mother." I took a step forward.

"Hello, Henry. This is what your father wanted for us. To be a family again."

"Mother, I missed you so much. I thought you…." I stopped speaking as she shook her head.

"You don't have to be afraid anymore. I'm here now. We're all here, and we don't ever have to die."

A frigid rain began to fall, making it even harder to see. Shadowy figures appeared behind my mother, gray ghosts moving between the tombstones.

"We? Who—"

Her smile drooped, one side dipping more than the other, turning her lips into a crooked frown. Water ran down her cheeks, washing away her rosy glow and exposing gray, lifeless skin that rippled like disturbed water. I wiped rain from my eyes and blinked. I had to be seeing things. The figures in the mist grew closer, larger, distracting me from my mother's form. Something about them…I glanced at my mother to warn her.

Half her face was gone, exposing gruesome black cavities. Dark, oily fluids dripped from an empty eye socket. Blood stained the front of her dress, where my father's knife had done its dirty work. The hand she held out to me wasn't her own; ragged stitches demarked the place where her flesh ended and someone else's began.

My mouth opened but no scream emerged, just a whispered moan. The figures came closer and my heart leaped as I recognized them. The two dead men from the pub, their heads magically restored but still decomposing. Behind them were more corpses, the other murder victims. Rotting and bloated, their peeling, sloughing skin colored in shades of gray and purple and green.

Beneath their putrid flesh, unseen things wriggled and swam, vague outlines somehow familiar and repellent at the same time.

"No." I backed away from the advancing creatures. I'd only seen one glimpse of what my father had done before he slammed the door on me, but that single image remained forever burned into my memories. At the time I'd been too young to comprehend everything I witnessed in those few seconds. Over the years, my imagination filled in some of the details, based on my own education and the bits and pieces of things I'd heard from people or read in the papers.

Now, though, I knew exactly what my father had tried to do. What he'd planned on turning my mother into, in the name of love.

Why? Why had he done it?

Why….

CHAPTER SEVEN

I came awake with a gasp. Cold tears dampened my cheeks and I wiped them away with a hand still trembling from my nightmare. Reliving the day of my father's sentencing always left me in the same state, depressed and resentful. This time terror had joined in as the dream took on new, frightful dimensions. Never before had my mother appeared in my sleep. Not in that way. And those other things….

God, I hope to never see them again.

Yet at the same time my sojourn into the past had opened my eyes.

The man I encountered in the alley. He was responsible for those things that attacked us in the pub. Somehow he did what my father never could and brought them back to a semblance of life. But for what purpose? Surely it had to be something far more sinister than to retrieve a lost book.

I had to discover what he was up to, this demon that lurked along the waterfront. Find him and bring him in to the police. It was the only way to clear my name.

But how? I couldn't tell Flannery or anyone else about the stranger. They'd think me a lunatic, more so than they already did. A desperate man spouting fairy tales of demons just to cover up my own insane actions.

I had to find the creature. The how and where of it could wait. First I needed to get out of jail so I could begin my search. But until I could place some doubt in Flannery's mind, or Ben arrived with bail money, I was stuck.

Still, I felt better with my decision made. I crossed the room and relieved myself in the foul chamber pot, then sat back down to wait. This time, I made sure I didn't fall asleep.

For the first time since boyhood, I feared my dreams.

★ ★ ★

In the gray silence of my cell, time became meaningless. I couldn't say if it was still Sunday or not. My stomach was no help, too knotted with anxiety to feel any hunger.

So when the clang of a door opening and the thump of someone treading on stairs roused me from my contemplation of my boots, all I anticipated was a guard delivering a meal. The footsteps drew closer and I made out two separate sets. The same surly officers who'd brought me down here? I hoped not, but no matter. Whoever it was, I'd ask to speak to Flannery again, even if I had to beg to see him. I stood and did my best to brush the dirt from my clothes.

And received a surprise.

Rather than my guards, Inspector Flannery's mustachioed face glared through the bars. "Step away from the door, Gilman."

I did as I was told, alert for any forthcoming violence.

The second officer, a skinny fellow in a uniform two sizes too large for his frame, unlocked the door and slid it back.

"Move it." Flannery pointed at the hallway. "You're free to go." Anger and loathing dripped from his words like rain from a gutter.

Free? I studied Flannery's scowling visage. Why would the man suddenly….

Wait. There's only one answer.

"Something happened."

Flannery's eyes narrowed even more. His fury burned like a fire. Even from ten feet away I felt it.

"Aye. There's been another murder."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The hours since my release had been long ones. I'd arrived home on Tuesday morning with just enough time to bathe and change before heading to Flora's apartment. The burial had been scheduled for Wednesday morning.

With no surviving relatives, the burden of Scott's passing fell squarely on Flora's shoulders, so Ben and I filled in for family, escorting a weeping Flora to and from the cemetery. Afterward, we readied the house for mourning and stood by her side while acquaintances and neighbors came by to offer condolences. Then we sat with her until she fell asleep, helped along by several fingers of laudanum-spiked whiskey.

Once she drifted off, I took my leave, envying Ben for his ability to get people to cover his shifts, allowing him to spend more time alone with Flora. No such opportunity for me. Not only were we shorthanded in the best of times, what with only two morgues in the city and one person working each, but focusing on the victims of the ghoulish murderer had left us far behind in our regular work. And with Flannery's suspicions still aimed in my direction, I needed to make sure I did nothing to upset the city council.

That was why Wednesday night found me at the morgue well after my workday ended, exhausted but determined to figure out the fiend's identity. The twin motivations of fear and self-preservation kept me slogging onward when all I wanted to do was collapse into my bed for a week.

I had a second motive as well. To find the demon who'd made my life, and the lives of my friends, a living hell.

After I finished my regular duties, I went about preparing the first stage of my investigation.

I cleared away more space in the room that doubled as a storage area and examination chamber and set up additional electric torches and gas lamps to drive away any shadows. Only then did I lay out the corpses of the two most recent victims, including Officer Stemple. The others had already been claimed by their families.

Both men died wearing the same expression: bulging eyes and gaping mouths, which the surgeon on police retainer attributed to lack of oxygen from being throttled, most likely with a rope or belt. I conceded that possibility, yet to my practiced eye those poor bastards seemed to have died screaming at the sight of something terrifying.

Like a deformed man with the face of a monster.

Forcing my own gruesome memories aside, I arranged the tools of my trade within easy reach: large and small magnifying lenses, scalpels, forceps, and scissors.

Despite never completing my medical training – thanks to my father's actions before and after his committal – I nevertheless felt confident that my understanding of basic human anatomy was on par with any physician's, due to time spent as a boy observing my father and then working in the morgue the past several years. I intended to succeed where others – namely the lazy dullards the police seemed to hire these days – had failed.

At first glance, I saw nothing not already noted in the official logs. Abrasions and bruising on the arms and hands, indicating a brief struggle. Mottling around the neck, consistent with strangulation.

Praying I wasn't giving up a night's sleep on a wild goose chase, I moved several of the lamps closer and chose a larger hand lens, in hopes the greater magnification would expose something as yet unseen. Bending low, I regarded Officer Stemple's throat once more.

And nearly dropped the glass in surprise.

There, revealed in terrifying detail, was the clue I'd been seeking.

Enlarged to several times their normal size, the strangulation marks revealed a previously hidden pattern. Within the heavy mottling lay a series of lighter colored, concentric rings, with a tiny dark spot at the very center, like a miniature bull's-eye.

My heart sped up and I had to control the urge to shout. *Focus*, I told myself. I switched to an even larger glass and examined a single, circular bruise. Under the extreme magnification, the black dot revealed itself as a puncture wound, no larger than a needle might make. To the naked eye, the miniature wound would be concealed by the injured skin surrounding it. A scrutiny of the other circular contusions showed the same puncture mark within each one.

I conducted an inspection of the other body and found the same signs of circular pressure and multiple piercings.

No, not piercings. Injections.

The implication of it all hammered at my brain. Poison! Which meant our killer was someone with more than a little knowledge of the human body, and of deadly substances. A medical professional, armed with syringe and knotted rope?

Or was it a rope? Those circles within circles…my mind went back to the nightmare I'd had in jail. Things squirming under the skin of the dead men…almost like….

Tentacles.

The connection formed in my brain. The marks on the victims' necks reminded me of the wounds left by the suckers found on the limbs of those oddest of sea beasts, the squid and the octopus. But how could one of those creatures strangle a full-grown man? It would have to be a massive creature, like something from a sailor's tale. And how would it get on dry land? It seemed impossible.

Still, there was one thing I felt certain of.

"No rope did this." The sound of my own voice in the hushed silence of the room made me twitch. I hadn't meant to speak aloud. Lips pressed tight so it wouldn't happen again, I picked up my charcoal stick and paper and sketched the markings, pausing now and then to check the wounds. I wanted to capture everything perfectly.

Once I finished, I set everything aside and took a deep breath.

Now came the hard part.

My hands trembled as I covered the two bodies and wheeled them back to their storage spaces in the cold room. The tremors grew worse when I approached the walking corpses from the pub, to the point where I doubted I'd be able to grip the first cart and move it.

"Get hold of yourself," I whispered, my vow to stay silent forgotten. "They're dead. Just as dead as the others."

Jaw clenched, sweat dampening my palms despite the frigid temperature, I grasped the handle and slowly rolled one of the metal tables to the receiving room. Then I stood there, indecision immobilizing me. In order to get the other body, I'd have to turn my back on this one. Either that, or leave the other one unattended in the storage room. Never mind that both of them had been in there the whole time. I hadn't been thinking about them then. Now all I could picture was one of the evil things sitting up, sheet falling down to reveal the destroyed face, pallid arms reaching out….

"You're being an ass." This time my words lent me courage. I straightened up and forced myself to turn around. "No such thing as demons. Whatever imbued them with life is long gone."

I walked back to the storage room for the second body. And I didn't look behind me, not once, although I did find myself wishing for the old practice of placing bells on the toes of the dead. Of course, I'm quite sure that if I'd heard them ringing I'd have keeled over right there, my heart petrified mid-beat. Despite my fear, I didn't hesitate or shake, for which I was grateful. I wanted to finish as quickly as possible and leave. A review of my notes and drawings could wait until I sat in the comfort and safety of my own study.

The absurdity of my disquiet didn't escape me, a man who worked with the dead on a daily basis suddenly nervous in their presence. I'd never been uncomfortable around corpses before; the dead were just inanimate lumps of flesh. But now I understood for the first time why cadavers filled so many people with such dread. In the past, my only issue had been the odor of decomposing flesh, especially in the warm months, when the reek of a days-old murder or accident victim would get so ripe that even liberally applied menthol couldn't block the cloying stench.

Now a different kind of atmosphere enveloped me, one of phantasms and secret whispers, as if each wisp of chilled air was a manifestation of a soul come to bring someone – or something – back to life.

"They'll be gone tomorrow," I kept reminding myself, each time I hesitated. The unknown men were scheduled for burial in the local Potter's Field, and Stemple's family would be coming around in the morning to claim him for his own interment. After tonight, there'd be no chance to examine the bodies, or the things growing inside them, the alien tissue woven through human muscle. What if it was something new, something contagious?

Something that could spread through the town?

I paused and bit at my lip. I had a fair knowledge of anatomy and basic human diseases. But anything else would be beyond me. If only I could take a sample of the foreign tissue to one of the biologists at Miskatonic, they'd be able to—

Dammit! Why hadn't I thought of that before? I needed samples. Not only could I bring them to the university, but I'd be able to examine them more thoroughly at my leisure, instead of simply relying on drawings and my own memory.

This time, as I rolled the table through the curtain separating the rooms, I began a list in my head of the additional items I'd need. Sample jars, formaldehyde. A bone saw. Possibly a—

A hint of movement caught my eye. A shape in the receiving room. Tall. Ghostly white.

No!

The figure moved toward me and I stumbled back, a scream already clawing from my throat. My foot caught on something and I fell, the room spinning around me. A heavy weight landed on my chest, knocking the air from my lungs.

The world went dark.

CHAPTER NINE

"Henry."

That voice! The creature who'd attacked me, who knew my name!

I lashed out with my fists even as I gasped for air. I had to get away! Had to—

Familiar laughter reached me. Close by. Two voices, a man and a woman.

I opened my eyes.

Ben and Flora stood several feet away. Staring at me with bemused looks, although sadness etched Flora's face as well.

"What…what the hell are you…?" The rest of the words stuck in my throat. I clutched at my chest with one hand while the other remained balled in a fist. At that moment, I'd have gladly broken Ben's nose.

"Sorry, sport. Guess we gave you a scare."

"A scare…you damn near killed me."

"Apologies." Ben looked anything but sorry as he leaned on his stylish walking cane, lips angled up in a rakish grin. "We thought you might be working too hard and need a break. Seems we were right."

"How did you get in?"

"Some foolish fellow left the front door unlocked." Ben raised a mocking eyebrow at me.

I tried to sit up but the heavy weight remained on my chest and legs, pinning me down. I tugged at it and realized it was simply the curtain that separated the storage area from the receiving room. It must have come down on me when I fell. Ben's smile grew wider as he watched me struggle to extricate myself.

Go ahead, have a good laugh at my expense. That's one I owe you, Ben Olmstead.

Then Flora stepped forward to help and my anger dissipated under her sympathetic gaze. As did Ben's smile.

"You shouldn't be out," I said, relishing each gentle touch of her fingers against my arms and chest.

"We really were worried. And I couldn't stand being cooped up in the house any longer."

Although she still wore black – and would continue to do so the rest of the year – she'd traded her opaque veil for one of mesh, which allowed me to see the truth in her eyes. Typical of Flora to skirt the edges of propriety. But then, she'd no doubt be going back to work soon, and a barmaid couldn't very well hide her face. Scott's solicitor had already informed us her inheritance would barely cover a few months' rent on the apartment she and Scott had shared. Without a job, she'd be forced to sell everything just to eat. Either that, or move to a place she could afford, which likely meant a less-than-desirable neighborhood.

Unless she marries someone. Someone with a steady job.

And a woman couldn't very well be courted while locked away in her rooms.

Is that why they're here? Is Flora already sizing us up, comparing—

"If you're too busy with your work—" Ben pointed his cane at the shrouded bodies, "—to join us for a bite, we can be off. There's always tomorrow." His expression indicated what he hoped I would say.

Fat chance, old friend. Time for a dose of your own medicine.

"No, I'm famished, as luck would have it. Let me just fetch my coat and hat." I had to bite back a smile of my own as Ben's cheek twitched. It was only a little after ten, plenty of time to have something to eat and drink and be back by midnight. Surely Flora was in no shape to be out longer than that. Then I'd get my samples and still be home in time to get a good night's sleep.

"Er, you might want to wash up as well." Ben waved a gloved hand in front of his nose as I stripped off my white apron.

"Yes, right." Damn! I rolled up my sleeves and headed for the sink. By now the stench of death would have permeated my clothing, and no amount of scrubbing my hands would change that. And me with no change of clothes. For once, Ben would be the more stylish of us, having obviously splurged on a new frock coat and matching pants. Even his shoes had a fresh shine to them. Under his bowler hat, his hair gleamed with expensive pomade.

Flora might not be looking for a partner yet, but Ben's certainly begun auditioning for the role.

The thought of it stung me to the quick. As much as I considered Ben

my oldest and dearest friend, on more than one occasion he'd given me cause to wonder if he felt the same.

After all, Ben knew of my feelings for Flora. Yet he persisted in his own attempts to court her, despite the fact that he could have any girl in the neighborhood with a tip of his hat and a smile. His rugged good looks, better than decent job, and a casual swagger so many women swooned over ensured he never lacked for companionship when he wanted it.

"It's the thrill of the chase," he'd confided to me one night over drinks. "You're welcome to her after I'm done."

His attitude bothered me enough that there'd been several times I'd considered asking Callie out and then standing her up. But each time, I quickly dashed the notion. Such an act would only hurt Callie, an innocent bystander in all of this, and probably not even bother Ben, who only cared about his own wants.

Not to mention it would paint me as a cad in Flora's eyes.

In the end, I did nothing, too afraid of alienating Flora and possibly pushing her and Ben together, the very thing I sought to prevent.

I slipped on my jacket and turned to my friends. "So, where are we—"

A flash of movement stopped me in mid-sentence.

A shroud cloth, sliding to the ground, exposing one of the bodies I'd just examined.

Officer Stemple's body.

My stomach clenched. No….

Stemple sat up, his mottled throat and gray eyes black in the dim light. Next to him, the other murder victim rose as well, casting its sheet away with a bluish arm. Its head turned in our direction. The lips twitched and the mouth sagged open.

I sucked in a sharp breath as an image of peculiar fibers moving within dead flesh came to me.

"Henry, what is it?" Flora turned and then gasped as the two corpses slid off their tables.

"Good God in heaven." Ben backed away, his face draining of color so that he looked as dead as the two bodies taking wobbling steps toward us.

"Into the viewing room." I shook Ben's arm. He gave me a blank stare and then his eyes cleared. We grabbed a wide-eyed Flora and dragged her across the threshold. I slammed the door shut behind us. The thin panel

rattled against the latch, reminding me it had no lock. I glanced around for something to block the door. The small room, located between the work area and the front office, held only a few pieces of furniture: four chairs and a viewing table for when people came to observe autopsies or identify the dead.

"Help me." I wedged one of the chairs under the door handle. We piled the rest behind it. Not enough to keep the monsters out for long, but perhaps enough so we could make it to the front entrance.

"This way." I led the way through the viewing area and into the front foyer, bolting past the reception desk.

Straight into a dead man at the door.

Flesh rippled and twitched on the corpse's face, set in motion by unseen things moving beneath the surface. Strong fingers clutched at my jacket. I pulled away and strings of flesh tore from its hands, the dead skin sloughing off in wet strips. I cried out and turned, only to have my feet slip on the vile fluids leaking from its ruined palms. I hit the desk and fell to the floor.

Hands grabbed my arm and I cried out, but it was only Ben. He helped me up just as two more walking corpses came through the door. Flora screamed.

"Back the other way." I pushed Ben toward Flora and the door we'd just come through. If we could somehow slip past the two in the waiting area—

A heavy blow struck me between the shoulders and knocked me forward into the waiting room. I landed on my knees, dragging Flora down with me. I rolled onto my back and froze as a vision from hell came to life above me.

Greenish tentacles burst from the mouths of the three corpses, turning them into unholy sea demons. The dead men moved toward us in herky-jerky motions. My stomach churned as I imagined more of the green, sinuous lengths snaking through their bodies, controlling their movements.

A slime-coated tendril struck Ben's forearm with a *crack*! like a horse whip. He yelped and leaped back, his sleeve torn and a red welt already forming on his skin. I caught sight of tiny, puckered orifices across the bottom of the tentacle and understood the origin of the circular marks on the bodies I'd examined.

Another lashing cilia wrapped around Ben's legs and pulled him off his

feet. He landed hard on his back with a grunt. The tentacle pulled back, revealing new wounds above Ben's ankles.

Gritting my teeth against the acid burn between my shoulders – had one of those vile appendages gotten me? – I forced myself to my hands and knees. Tears of pain blurred my vision and added to the nightmare quality of the moment.

Think! There had to be something, a weapon of some kind….

Then I saw it. A box stacked in the corner. No label on it, but I knew what it contained. Lamp oil. A half dozen bottles. I'd placed it there myself, with the intention of moving it into the storage area in the morning.

Now I just had to reach it.

Pain exploded in my calf and I screamed. A slimy cord gripped my leg and pulled me back, sending me to my stomach. I kicked it with my other foot. The blasphemous thing let go and I dragged myself forward another few inches.

Another fat tendril fell across my legs and this time I felt the tiny mouths chewing through my clothing and into my flesh. Visions of deadly injections came to me, poisons – or worse! – entering my bloodstream. I shook my legs and rolled to the side, my terror a palpable thing, my own alien beast controlling my body.

Five more feet. That's all I needed.

More fire, this time around my ankle.

I wrenched my leg away and pushed forward. Lunged for the box.

A tendril slapped down from right next to me and clutched at my wrist.

Stemple!

In my fixation on reaching the box, I'd forgotten the two monsters from the storage room. I tried to yank my arm loose but the coil tightened. I punched at the slick, muscular appendage and in return a second one flogged my neck and shoulder. Warm fluids on my skin told me it had drawn blood.

Only a matter of seconds before their combined strength pulled me back too far. I put all my efforts into reaching out with my free hand. I grabbed for the crate, my fingers touching the edge and then sliding off the rough wood. Splinters pierced my skin but I ignored them, lunging again at the box just as Stemple's hands clutched the hem of my coat.

This time I got a better grip and the box fell over. A bottle of oil rolled toward me and I fumbled the cork out with one hand. Agonizing pain

raced across my back and down my arm, tearing another scream from my throat. Sweat and blood made the bottle slippery but I kept hold as I turned over and threw it at the thing next to me. The heavy odor of lamp oil filled the air and the Stemple-creature let go. I stretched forward and grabbed another bottle. A tentacle squeezed my wrist and my hand opened. The bottle fell and the cork popped out. Oil splashed the box and the floor, soaking my sleeves.

A numb sensation spread through my captured hand, dulling the pain. Sudden fear spurred me to move faster. If I'd been injected with whatever the demons used to kill their prey, I didn't have much time. I dug into my pocket for my matchbox. It came free but with only one hand I couldn't open it.

"Ben." I couldn't see past the dead thing looming over me. Grotesque cilia hung from Stemple's mouth, wriggling in anticipation of capturing prey. Dead eyes stared down at me, cold and lifeless as those of fish in the market. I dropped the matches and tried to push myself away but my hand slid uselessly in lamp oil, unable to gain traction. A second dead man joined Stemple, and I knew there'd be no escaping them.

Until a new figure darted past and grabbed the matchbox.

Flora!

She kept moving, a dark shadow gliding across my field of vision before disappearing. In her wake, bluish-yellow flames sprang to life, following the spread of oil on the floor. Flames attacked the monster's legs and it backed away, releasing me in the process. I rolled to the side and a wave of heat enveloped me. Everywhere I looked, fire jumped and danced, greedily climbing the walls and racing across the floor.

The heat ate at my arms and back, worse than the pain inflicted by the monsters' attacks. Arms ablaze, I stripped off my jacket and beat at the floor, which only scattered the flaming droplets farther.

"Henry!" A man's voice. All I saw was yellow and orange.

A hand appeared in front of me. I clutched at it, used its strength to pull myself up. I opened my mouth to say something but superheated air scorched my lungs. The room spun. Which room? I couldn't remember. We had to leave. I turned again, my sense of direction gone. Heavy smoke made it hard to see. Figures moved in the mist. My confusion grew. Was I inside or outside? I tried to run but something held me. A sunrise glowed in the fog. Morning already? So hot. Too hot.

Something pushed me hard in the back.

Fog. Monsters. Fire. Going to die here—

A ball of glowing white exploded all around me. Thunder filled the world.

And with it came pain.

CHAPTER TEN

"Gilman. Glad you made it. Come along, I've something to show you." Flannery waved to me. Behind his mustache, his face lacked its usual ruddy appearance and his ever-present frown was grimmer than normal. Soot and water marred his suit, the first time I'd ever seen him not looking as if he'd just emerged from a haberdashery.

Shards of glass filled my lungs so that the very act of breathing made me groan, which in turn added to my agony. My body ached from head to toe and my skin felt tight and hot, as if I'd spent too much time in the summer sun.

I followed him. Moving hurt but I didn't care. I was alive. Despite the searing flames and blinding smoke, somehow I'd found the exit – I couldn't even remember doing it – and made it out, Ben and Flora right behind me. We'd stumbled into the street and collapsed. We'd still been lying there when the police and firemen showed up. At some point I must have lost consciousness, because when I opened my soot- and blood-crusted eyes, Ben was holding a cup of water for me and the fire was mostly out. Flannery was there too, and he ordered us to stand off to the side until he was ready to speak with us.

Now that time had come, at least for me.

"What is it?" It came out as a hoarse croak, but I savored each word. They only hurt a little and they no longer tasted like I'd chewed on a lamp wick. I wobbled for the first few steps but the cold night air helped clear both head and lungs and by the time we reached what was left of the morgue's front entrance, I felt lucid enough to think.

The acrid stink of burned wood and chemicals assaulted my nose and brought on another coughing fit. Flannery waited until it ended before speaking again.

"This way." Without waiting, he strode into the building, turning his bulky form sideways to ease past the door, which hung broken and twisted from one hinge.

Inside, the destruction was worse. Furniture overturned, glass everywhere. Water splashed underfoot and the miasma of oily fumes lay over everything. My eyes watered and the ache in my lungs returned, but I kept silent.

Until we reached the viewing room.

"Good…" another coughing fit took me, "…Lord," I finished, holding my arm over my face.

Thick soot, turned to mud by the firefighters who'd apparently been and gone while I lay unconscious, painted wide swaths across the floor and walls. In several places, I was able to see through gaping holes into the next room – and in one wall, to the warehouse next door. The autopsy table and viewing chairs were nothing but blackened debris.

Flannery paid no attention to my distress and pointed at a large charred mound in the center of the room.

"Care to tell me what the fuck that is?"

I stepped closer and a new odor assailed me, the vile stench of overcooked meat and fish. My stomach threatened to rise up but I forced myself to move closer, knowing I had to face the horrors waiting for me.

And somehow explain them to Flannery.

Someone had laid the corpses next to each other, shoulder to blackened, flaking shoulder. The faces were completely gone, nothing but skulls peering through remnants of flesh. Most of the clothes had burned away as well, and bone showed in several places.

Of the abhorrent tentacles, no trace remained.

I shook my head. How was I to explain what we'd witnessed, the monstrous things that had attacked us? No doubt Flannery, in all his misguided hatred of me and my family, was ready to arrest me again, this time for murder and arson. I looked back. Perhaps if Ben and Flora were with me to lend credence to my story….

"Don't play coy with me, Gilman. I saw them with my own two eyes. The things."

I jumped at Flannery's words. "You did?"

"Aye. Disgusting creatures. Two officers heard screaming and saw the broken door. They went in and one of those demon bastards came at them, clothes afire, and…"

Flannery's voice trailed off and he looked down at the corpses.

"…it was fucking Stemple, one of them said," he finally finished.

"How can that be?"

"This isn't my doing." I wanted nothing more than to run from the building, but I had just one chance to clear my name with Flannery.

"Despite my feelings about you, I tend to believe that. No man, not even a twisted loon like your father, could create something like that. Not without…." He frowned and poked his foot at one of the bodies before glaring at me. "But I think you know more than you've told. So spill it, Gilman, or I'll lock you up just for the hell of it."

A picture appeared in my head, and a sick feeling came to life in my stomach. The demon-faced man standing outside the morgue while his undead slaves entered to carry out their dastardly mission.

And that mission was?

"The book." The words left my mouth before I knew I was going to say them.

"Book? What in hell are you yappin' about?"

A great relief came over me. No more secrets. I'd spill all my beans for Flannery. I needed police protection, or at least their help. The ghoul-faced demon wanted me dead, and with the squid creatures to do his bidding, nowhere was safe.

"I'll tell you what I've learned," I said, motioning toward the door. "But not here. My house. And Ben and Flora have to come as well."

Without waiting for an answer, I walked out. Flannery would believe me or he wouldn't. If he did, the police would hunt down the demon and kill it. If he didn't, he'd lock me away in the asylum same as they did my father.

Either way, it didn't matter.

I'd be safe.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I opened my front door and came to a stop. Behind me, Flora gasped.

The front parlor lay in shambles. Furniture overturned, books and papers scattered on the floor, and shelves swept clean. Cushions ripped open and the stuffing torn out in clumps. Shattered glass from broken figurines and curios that had once belonged to my mother littered the floor. A rancid odor hung in the air, akin to decomposing fish.

Fear raced through me. Him! It was him!

On the heels of that, a second thought rose up.

The book.

"I take it you didn't leave the house like this?" Flannery asked. I ignored him and rushed into the adjoining study, which had been my father's examination room and office when his medical practice operated in good standing. Like the parlor, it showed obvious signs of vandalism. Desk drawers open, contents spilling out in haphazard fashion. Bookcases ransacked. Cabinets emptied. Liquor cart overturned, the sweet fragrance of brandy overpowering the lingering briny stench.

I crossed the room, stepping around broken glass and tacky, wet stains, and knelt by a plain-looking wooden cabinet set against the wall. The doors stood open and more papers were scattered in front of it.

Please no, don't let him have—

I reached inside and relief surged through me. The would-be thief hadn't found the hidden compartment I'd originally installed to store morphine and laudanum back when I intended to pursue a degree in medicine. With the rapid decline of the neighborhood, it wasn't safe anymore to keep such things out in the open. After being forced to leave school, I'd begun using it as a place to hide my valuables.

"It's here." I pressed the tiny button that unlocked the panel. It swung open, revealing a square space in which sat the book I'd found in the alley. I lifted the heavy volume out, my skin crawling as my fingers touched the cover.

"This is what they were after."

I set the book atop my desk. Flannery, Ben, and Flora gathered round.

"This?" Flannery placed his hand on the cover and pulled back with a start. "Bloody hell. It's…."

His words trailed off and he frowned at the book while wiping his hand against his leg.

"Yes, it feels awful to the touch." I looked at the others. "I need to tell you how I came by it. I haven't been quite honest with any of you."

This time I left nothing out, starting with being accosted in the alley and ending with the ghastly life-forms living inside the dead bodies at the morgue. When I finished, there was a moment where no one spoke.

Then Flora let out a cry.

"You bastard!" She flew at me, gloved hands clawing at my face. Ben and Flannery grabbed her, pulled her away. She didn't fight them but she continued to shout.

"You should have told us! Bloody demons following you. My brother's dead because of them! Why didn't you—" She buried her face in her hands, sobbing.

"Might be best if you took her home," Flannery said to Ben.

He nodded. "I'll stay with her. Just to be safe." Fire lit his eyes as he cast a glare in my direction.

"Flora, I didn't mean for any of this to happen." I took a step toward her but she turned away. I could only watch as Ben led her to the door. Neither of them looked back.

The sound of the front door closing stabbed cold ice through my heart. I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting back the tears that threatened to escape. Thanks to my own fear and stupidity I'd lost the woman I loved and my best friend, had brought ruin into their lives. Would they ever forgive me? What would I do if they turned their backs on me forever? How could I go on?

Flannery cleared his throat. "Worry about them later. Tell me why this thing is so blasted important."

The damned book. If only I'd never found it.

"I don't know," I said, when Flannery made a point of harrumphing again. "I only opened it once, briefly, the night I found it. It's gibberish. Not Greek nor Latin, nor anything I've seen. Definitely ancient. I was going to bring it to the college to get it translated, but with everything that happened…."

Flannery lifted a few of the stiff yellow pages with a fingertip, his scowl deepening from even that slight touch. They appeared to be made of leather or heavy parchment rather than paper. He peered at the unreadable symbols and letters covering them and let the cover drop down.

"You think someone there can read this shite?"

"I don't know, but there may be someone in the administration department I can ask." That is, if I could speak to Callie before Ben turned her against me as well.

Flannery stood up, his bulk towering over me.

"Well then, what are we waiting for?"

★ ★ ★

In the obscured light of another gray morning, Miskatonic University evoked comparisons to long-forgotten civilizations more than proud institutions of higher learning. Square buildings formed of carefully laid stone blocks loomed like half-finished pyramids and oversized crypts. Tall obelisks rose up menacingly from the fog, origins and purposes both unknown.

Cobbled pathways wound in mystifying patterns through the wide campus. As a freshman, I'd gotten lost more than once dashing from one class to the next, and even seniors and instructors had been known to get disoriented on the foggiest mornings. According to legend, there'd once been a student who'd ended up so off course during spring recess he'd stumbled through the mist for days, never realizing he'd ended up in the athletic fields. When school resumed a week later, they found him curled in a ball, spouting gibberish, his eyes wide, his skin covered in creeping mold.

He died not long after.

Many say his ghost still haunts the paths at night, forever seeking his dormitory.

I'd scoffed at the tale when I heard it, but on more than a few occasions it had brought a shiver to me when I had trouble locating a particular building in the murky haze.

A subtle taint hung in the air, an integral component of the mists that formed a constant blanket over the area. The metallic tang of wet, mineral-laden mud, redolent with the briny reek of seafood markets and stagnant waters from the nearby harbor, and something else, something darker and

older than time, an unpleasant yet somehow familiar essence that induced thoughts of cold and gloom and infiltrated a person's very body, as if carried through the lungs into blood and tissue.

Setting foot onto the campus brought back memories I preferred to keep locked away. Although more than a year had passed since I'd been unceremoniously cast out, I still couldn't think of the place without tasting bitter resentment at the back of my mouth. I'd only been back a few times since then, once to help Callie move into her apartment near the campus and to see her office in the administration building, and the others when I required a book from the library or got paid to demonstrate embalming techniques for the medical students.

"Damned fog. Just as bad here as Innsmouth." Flannery wore a navy peacoat over the clean suit he'd changed into. Silvery beads of moisture dotted his hat and shoulders and ran down the wool like spilled mercury. I pulled my sweater tighter but didn't respond, my mood as bitter as the weather. There'd always been a particular chill to the Miskatonic campus, a damp, raw cold that gnawed at the bones. My physics teacher once gave a vague explanation involving localized depressions and sea caverns that made no sense. Everyone else I queried simply shrugged and said it was 'one of those things'.

After a couple of wrong turns, I managed to find the administration building. It looked the same as the last time I'd visited, a two-story stone structure with the bare minimum of windows, as if the architects wanted to keep out the depressing view of the campus. Red and brown vines crawled across the outer walls in ominous patterns.

Despite the early hour, we found Callie at her desk, a steaming cup of tea and a pile of papers in front of her.

"Henry!" She stood up, a broad smile lighting up her face. "What a pleasant surprise."

Her greeting informed me that Ben hadn't yet contacted her. All the better for us.

Dressed in a fashionable yet conservative blue skirt, white blouse, and black jacket, Callie brightened up the gloomy institutional gray office just by her presence. She wore two pieces of jewelry, a silver-rimmed cameo on her lapel and a small brooch of green stone over her left breast. My heart stuttered when I saw the design: a triangle with what appeared to be an octopus inside it. Then I remembered it was the university's

mascot, had been for decades. Several teachers had worn similar pieces when I'd attended. I calmed somewhat. Just a coincidence, although it still engendered a sensation of disquiet in my bowels.

Seeing Callie always put me in a reflective mood, and this time was no different. As always, I wondered what our lives might have been like if Flora had found a man and put an end to my besotted dreams. Most likely Callie and I would be married with several children, living in Arkham rather than Innsmouth. A part of me wished it had happened; that imaginary life had to be better than the situation I found myself in now.

But my feelings for Flora overwhelmed any regrets for the road not taken. Someday I would have both the girl and the life I desired. I felt it in my heart.

"Hello, Callie." I kissed her chastely on her cheek and stepped back. "I'm afraid this isn't a social call. Inspector Flannery and I are here on police business and we need your help."

Her gaze shifted from me to my hulking companion and her eyes narrowed. "Mine?"

"Yes." Flannery stepped forward. "We need a book translated. It's in a language we're not familiar with."

"Something old," I said. "Neither Latin nor Greek."

"Really?" She glanced at me, her expression one of sudden interest. "Can I see it?"

I pulled it from my valise and held it up, but didn't pass it to her. The feel of the cover no longer sent shivers down my back but knowing the effect it had on people, I spared Callie that discomfort. Her eyes went wide and she almost seemed disappointed when I returned it to my bag.

"That does look old," she said.

"Henry believes there might be someone on the staff who could assist us, and he feels you could aim us in the right direction."

"I see." She stared at Flannery for a long moment, her expression no longer quite as friendly. Finally, she favored me with a smile. "Of course I'll help. You probably want Professor George Angell."

"Angell? He's still around?"

"Some say he's been here forever," Callie said, and I didn't doubt it. He'd certainly looked ancient when I'd last seen him.

"And where might we find him?" Flannery asked.

"The Morgan-Ashley building." Callie's face went hard again at his

words. She took pen and paper from a drawer and jotted something down. "Here are the directions. The campus can be somewhat confusing if you haven't spent much time here."

Flannery let out a derisive snort. "That's a bit of an understatement."

Callie's eyes narrowed at his words, then she handed the paper to me, her cool fingers lingering just a second longer than necessary against mine.

"I'm glad to see you're recovered from that awful occurrence at the pub. Is everything all right in Innsmouth? How is Flora doing?"

"You can chat with your friend on your own time, Gilman," Flannery interrupted. "Let's get a move on."

"Maybe you can tell me about your police work some day, Henry." She ignored the inspector and stared up at me. I noticed that her eyes were the same exotic sea green as her pin. They'd always attracted me. "I could come up on Saturday."

"Er, um, we'll have to see. It all depends if I'm finished with our, er, project." I motioned at Flannery.

"Soon, then," she said. "We must catch up." I nodded, and we bid our goodbyes.

"Seems the lass has an interest," Flannery said, once we were outside. I glanced back at the building, saw Callie peering down at us from her second-floor window, her face nearly hidden by eons of grime.

"We need to turn left here." I pointed at an intersection of paths, ignoring the inspector's comment. He took the hint and we both remained silent as we made our way through the maze of buildings until we reached a massive oblong structure of ancient stone and brick that, according to Callie, housed the history and archeology departments.

Once inside, after we'd stomped and shaken off the worst of the dew clinging to shoes and clothes, I consulted Callie's note.

"Professor Angell's office is in the basement."

"You know this fellow? Thought you studied to be a surgeon or something."

"I did." I was surprised Flannery knew anything about my background other than my father's sordid past. "I've never met the man, but I saw him around campus a few times, and his picture's been in the papers. He's rather renowned in archeological circles. Specializes in Egyptian and Sumerian cultures or something. Spends much of his time traveling

the world and digging up ruins. If he can't translate this book, he'll surely know who can."

Our footsteps echoed off the smooth tile floor and stone walls as we descended the stairs. The air took on a decidedly dank chill and the walls held a dampness to them that made me think of ancient stone passageways covered in faraway lands.

We pushed through the doors at the bottom and entered a hallway that was more like a tunnel, illuminated poorly by a few widely spaced lights on the walls. We'd arrived well before first classes and had the place to ourselves, it seemed.

"Not what I'd call an atmosphere conducive to learning," Flannery muttered, and I had to agree with him. The gloomy surroundings were anything but inviting. Even the air seemed wrong, tainted with hints of decomposing mushrooms and swamp mud.

Halfway down the corridor a door stood open, spilling weak yellow light into the hallway. As we drew closer, I saw the name *George Gammell Angell* stenciled on the frosted glass. Inside, a dour-faced woman sat at a simple wooden desk, sorting through a pile of folders. She wore a lapel pin identical to Callie's.

I approached the desk and cleared my throat. "Excuse me. We need to speak to Professor Angell."

The woman glanced up, her dark brows nearly meeting as her frown deepened.

"No, you'll have to come back another time." She returned to her filing.

Flannery strode forward.

"Madam, this is police business. We must speak to Professor Angell right away."

The woman's lips tightened and she exhaled slowly. My nose wrinkled as I caught a hint of foul breath, which brought to mind festering sores and gangrenous flesh. That, in turn, led to images of the corpses rising in the morgue and from there to the memories of my father, wrist deep in my mother's body, a dead man's organs in his hands.

Melancholy threatened to overwhelm me and I forced my attention back to Flannery, who was already losing patience with the woman's silence. He leaned down and placed both hands on the woman's desk, using his imposing presence to full effect.

"Ma'am, I shan't ask again. Tell the professor we are here and need to speak to him on a most urgent matter."

Another sigh, and this time the sickness emanating from her lungs forced me back a step. I gripped the heavy satchel holding the recovered book to my chest, half tempted to lift it up as a shield against the offensive odor. Even Flannery wrinkled his nose and turned his head.

Dull gray eyes stared at us from within dark caverns created by her overhanging brow and sharp cheekbones. A tiny hint of a smile twitched the corners of her colorless lips. It did nothing to improve her cheerless nature.

"Well, then, you're welcome to wait. I hope it's not too urgent, though. The professor isn't here at the moment." She turned back to her files. I glanced around the room. Other than her desk and a small wastebasket, it contained no other furniture and just one other door, which I assumed led to the professor's private office. If we waited, we'd be expected to stand.

"When in blazes do you expect him back?" Flannery's face had gone a deep red, a sure sign he was about to lose his temper. Had it been anyone other than a professional woman sitting across from him he'd like as not already have baton in hand.

"Oh, not for a while, I imagine. He's in Antarctica." Her smile widened another fraction of an inch for the joke she'd had at our expense.

"Antarct—? Why in the dickens didn't you say that from the beginning?" Flannery thumped his hands on the desk.

I stepped forward before the inspector exploded into a tirade. The woman seemed hell-bent on being uncooperative and Flannery's ire would only make her more so. "Who can we speak to in his stead?"

"Professor Gardiner is the department chairman for the semester."

"That's fine. Where can we find him?"

"Through there." She pointed at the closed door and bent back to her papers.

Flannery's mouth dropped open but I stopped his undoubtedly vehement retort with a touch to the arm. "Let's see if Gardiner can help us."

"Eh. I damn well hope so."

The inspector rapped twice on the door and opened it without waiting for a response. He took two steps and then came to a stop so fast I would have walked into him had I not been frozen in place as well.

Rather than the studious office I expected, an enormous space spread out before us, so long and wide that at first it seemed impossible, as if we'd been taken by magics and transported to an ancient city.

Statues of black stone stood in long rows, their narrow, elongated faces staring into the distance. Twice my height, they glowered at unseen enemies, their mouths pressed into tight-lipped moues. Behind them, a series of columns and obelisks stood to either side of an archway, with curious figures carved across their glass-like surfaces.

Something moved between two of the columns, a glimpse of a pale figure seen and then gone, and my pulse speeded up.

The demon! He's here. We have to—

"Good morning. Can I help you?"

The figure emerged again, walking toward us, and my legs went weak with relief. Only a man, dressed in faded khaki pants and shirt. Tall and aged, with short-cropped gray hair so lacking in color it blended together with his sallow face.

"Are you Professor Gardiner?" Flannery strode forward.

"I am."

The spell broken, everything became clear to me. The vast expanse of the ancient city revealed itself as a huge storage area. The gray, alien sky nothing but a tall ceiling lit by a scattering of electric light bulbs. The statues and pillars stood on a tile floor coated with unswept dust and grime rather than the sands of ages. Archeological tools – picks, hammers, drop cloths, brushes – lay strewn about, alongside camera equipment and drawing tablets.

Gardiner held out a pallid, liver-spotted hand. Unlike Callie or the sullen woman who'd given us such a hard time, he wore no pin on his shirt. For some odd reason, that comforted me. "Owen Gardiner, at your service. And you are?"

"Inspector Patrick Flannery. And this is Henry Gilman. We're hoping you can help us translate some kind of ancient book Henry found."

"A book." The professor's dark blue, rather rheumy eyes sparked with excitement. "What kind of book? Where did you find it?"

"Near the Innsmouth waterfront," Flannery answered before I could say anything. "We believe it was dropped by the man responsible for the murders down there."

"Oh dear. Please, follow me. My desk is in the back."

"Just what is all this?" Flannery asked, as the professor led us on a winding route through the towering artifacts.

"Professor Angell and his team made an astounding discovery in Antarctica. A previously unknown civilization, possibly older than the Egyptians or Sumerians. He shipped these back and we turned this entire floor into a storage area to study them. I've been working on deciphering the writing. An odd mixture of Ugantic cuneiform and proto-Sumerian pictographs the likes of which neither of us has ever seen. If I were twenty years younger, I'd be there with him. Instead, I have to make do with whatever he sends back."

I glanced at one of the obelisks and a cold dread gnawed at my belly. Mixed among the lines and shapes were vile depictions of hideous creatures. Insects with the faces of men. Crawling things with eyes all over their bodies.

Squid-like beasts with mouths on their tentacles.

I stopped. The repulsive drawings covered all the pillars, winding around from top to bottom. I had the distinct impression they told a story – no, a warning! – that some primitive part of my brain somehow understood. A tale of death and destruction, of evil and hatred.

A shiver ran up my back. These were no mere imaginings carved by primitive people. They were depictions of actual demons, appalling monsters from the depths of hell. I sensed the truth of it in my very soul.

As I continued to stare, the vile depictions came to life on the stone, the etched lines squirming and wriggling. Claws and pincers opened and closed. Mouths snapped. Obscene bodies heaved and humped and swam. Eyes turned toward me, filled with malevolent intelligence. Tentacles reached out to snare unsuspecting victims, eager to rend bodies and limbs. Twisted parodies of human faces grinned madly as beasts mounted each other with suddenly tumescent genitalia. A loathsome odor filled my nose, ripe with corruption and degradation somehow made palpable to the senses.

Henry.

They knew my name! I wanted to scream, to flee, but fear held me firmly in place. A chorus of voices, evil incarnate yet somehow familiar, echoed around me.

Henry.

Not around me. Inside my head! I was going mad, none of this was possible. I had to—

"Henry!"

The grisly display froze at Flannery's voice. I blinked and the violent scenes were gone, the horrible etchings returned to their original places. All that remained of my vision was a pounding ache in my head and a feeling of nausea in my stomach.

"Stop dawdling, man." The inspector scowled at me from several yards ahead, where he and Gardiner had stopped. The stench of rotting fish still poisoned my nose, but neither Flannery nor the professor seemed to notice anything amiss.

"Coming." I barely managed to make myself heard. My lungs seemed devoid of air. I hurried to catch up, keeping my eyes straight ahead, refusing to look at the depraved artwork.

"The book. Come on, we haven't got all day." Flannery stood by a large wooden desk covered in mounds of papers. To my despair, I saw that many of them contained sketches and rubbings of the very things I hoped to never gaze upon again.

"Here it is." I drew the tome from his satchel, all the hairs on my arms rising up as I touched it. I placed it on the desk and backed away so that I couldn't see the awful pictures.

Gardiner's eyes went wide.

"I don't believe it." He opened the book, seemingly unaffected by whatever ability it had to produce revulsion when handled. "When you told me…. I hoped, but I never…."

"Never what?" Flannery's impatience surfaced again.

"This is the *Pnakotica*. You've found it."

"The *Nakota*-what?" A deep frown creased Flannery's brow.

"The *Pnakotica*. An ancient book of spells dating back to the earliest days of civilization. Legend has it they were transcribed from gods that visited the Earth. Previously they only existed as a series of scrolls, which disappeared long ago. But Professor Angell learned of this copy a few months ago from a source in Persia. He had it sent here but the very night the ship docked in Innsmouth, the book was stolen. I reported it to the police." Gardiner frowned at them. "Isn't that why you're here?"

"I don't know anything about a theft. We're here to find out what the damn book is, and why some lunatic was running around with it."

"When was it stolen?" I asked.

Gardiner scratched at this chin. "A week ago, perhaps? Five days? What day is it? I've been so busy here I've rather lost track of time."

While Gardiner spoke, the cold chill in my belly spread to the rest of my body. Five days. Everything seemed so clear now. Just more of my damned rotten luck. My decision to take a shortcut to the pub had landed me right in the middle of the theft, most likely interrupting the demon-man as he took possession of the book from whatever poor sod he'd paid to steal it. He'd killed the thief to leave no witnesses, and then….

And then I buggered everything and now it wants me dead as well.

The timing wasn't lost on Flannery, who shot a knowing glance my way before addressing Gardiner again.

"Well, you've got your book back. Although I'd be careful, if I were you. Several men have died because of it. However, if you don't mind, we still need your help. Can you translate it for us?"

One of Gardiner's bushy eyebrows rose up and he gave a short laugh.

"Translate it for you? It's yet to be translated for anyone. That's why Professor Angell sent it to me. He believes the glyphs on the obelisks and the writings in the book are both the work of the Yithians."

"Yithians?" Flannery looked like he'd swallowed sour milk as he pronounced the word.

"That's one of a handful of words he managed to decipher before shipping everything here. The word Yith occurs in several places, always in context with the persons who dwelled in the city. Angell believes the obelisks are a dictionary of sorts, but that they also tell the history of the city. As time went on, more of them were added."

"And the book?"

"The added content should be invaluable in decoding their alphabet."

I pulled my sweater tighter against the chill sinking farther into my bones the longer I stood in the midst of all that horror. I could think of nothing worse than spending day after day studying the revolting depictions.

"Well, this was a damned waste of time." Flannery slapped his hat against the desk.

"Professor Gardiner, isn't there anything you can tell us about the *Pnakotica*? You said it was a book of spells."

Flannery shot me a narrow-eyed glare. I wasn't sure if the inspector's anger stemmed from the topic of the question or that I had usurped his role by asking a question in the first place.

"Yes, yes, it is." Gardiner carefully turned several of the brittle pages. "I suppose I'm as acquainted with the history of the *Pnakotica* as anyone, save Professor Angell. He's really the one who—"

"Just get on with it, man. We don't have all day."

"Ah, of course, Inspector. My apologies. I tend to…never mind. The *Pnakotica* is indeed a book of spells, more ancient than any others. You've heard of the *Necronomicon*? The *Codex of Djer*? No? Suffice to say, the *Pnakotica* predates them all. Rumors of its existence can be found in the writings of most ancient civilizations, such as the Sumerians and the Egyptians of the First Dynasty. It was long believed to have originated in Atlantis, but Professor Angell has a theory—"

"I don't give a strumpet's purse about history or ancient civilizations," Flannery interrupted. "Just tell us why someone would want the blasted thing."

"Why? Well, really, there's only one reason." Gardiner closed the book and placed his hand on the cover. Despite the abhorrent drawings visible on the desk, I found myself leaning closer.

"To bring the dead to life."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The carriage ride back to Innsmouth was a cold and silent one. Flannery stared straight ahead, an unread newspaper folded on his lap, his pursed lips and narrowed eyes a warning not to speak to him. Which suited me just fine. My thoughts were awhirl from what we'd learned and I spent my time looking out the window at the dismal, gray countryside passing by while I tried to make sense of everything.

"To bring the dead back to life."

Gardiner's words sat in my belly like sour cheese. The walking corpses. Was that how the demon had made them? Through dark magics? According to him, the book might have even more sinister ramifications.

"The *Pnakotica* contains a series of spells that supposedly deal with calling ancient gods back to Earth and for returning life to demons and other abominable creatures. No one is exactly sure, since the book hasn't been seen in centuries and it's never been translated into a modern tongue."

The professor had promised to let us know if he came up with anything that might be useful to us. He also asked us how the theft of the book and the murders were related, but Flannery brushed him off.

"That's what we're trying to determine." With that, he'd turned and exited the storeroom without so much as a good day. I'd muttered a thank-you to Gardiner and hurried to catch up, my mind awhirl.

Demons. Possession. Dead men returning to life. It all seemed so crazy. Yet I'd witnessed it with my own eyes, seen the loathsome things within….

The demon had brought the dead back to life. But for what purpose? To commit murder? There was no shortage of living men in Innsmouth who'd be happy to do that for a few coins. Why go to such trouble?

Flannery apparently had his own theory for that, one he hadn't shared aloud but that his eyes, his demeanor, had practically shouted as he stared at me, his expression one of distracted ire.

Bring the dead back to life. That's what your father tried to do.

I heard the words as clear as if the man spoke them. And I couldn't

deny it. Silas Gilman hadn't used magic, but he'd strived for the same goal, in his own mad way. Bring his wife – my mother – back from the land of the dead.

Organs strewn about. Corpses piled in the corner, their bodies torn open as if by a ravenous beast. My mother's pale form, wires attached to her neck, the gaping hole in her—

Acid bile rose in my throat and I choked it back, pressed a fist against my mouth to keep from cursing aloud. I squeezed my eyes shut against the coming tears that always accompanied my memory of that night, when I'd walked in on my father's insane attempt to play God.

"Henry—" My father shooing me out of the room, his hands dripping in blood.

"Henry—" The demon in the alley, right before I pulled the trigger.

"Henry."

I jumped in my seat and turned to find Flannery regarding me with narrowed, angry eyes.

"What?"

"Get your head out of the clouds, man, or you're apt to lose it. I don't believe we've seen the last of your demon. You don't have his book anymore, but he doesn't know that. He'll be coming for you, sure as night follows day."

I nodded, well aware I'd made myself a target for the thing the dailies had taken to calling the 'Fish Street Strangler' because of where the first body had been found. Every time I looked Flannery's way, the lurid headlines of his newspaper screamed at me. Fish Street Strangler Strikes Again. Police Baffled.

Flannery lapsed back into silence and stayed that way until we reached my house, which was fine with me. A new fear gripped me, one I dared not bring up in front of the inspector. Not yet. As I stepped out of the carriage, Flannery stopped me.

"I'm keeping an eye on you, Gilman. Mayhap you didn't commit those murders, but you're involved in some way. I know it." The inspector tapped his nose. "I can smell it on you. Truth be told, if your cursed father wasn't already dead, I'd think him responsible. But I've got to figure it's some other loon who's decided to do the devil's work."

He pointed a stout finger my way.

"Apple and the tree. That's what I keep thinking. Let's go," he called

to the driver. The carriage rolled away, leaving me to ponder Flannery's words and my own fearful musings.

If your father wasn't already dead.

I unlocked my door. I needed a warmer coat, as I intended to check on Flora, which meant a walk of several blocks.

But first I had a vital errand to run.

★ ★ ★

Two hours later, I exited the pay station two dimes poorer but with greater piece of mind. My call to Arkham Sanitarium had been expensive but worth every penny. I'd spoken to a Dr. Morgan, who'd taken over operation of the asylum after the great fire.

"I assure you, your father is quite definitely dead," he'd told me, after I asked the question that had plagued me since my waking nightmare on the trip home from Miskatonic. Even then, I couldn't bring myself to believe it.

"How can you be so sure?" I asked. "His body was never recovered."

A burst of static assaulted my ear and then the doctor's voice, rendered thin and distant by the telephone lines, continued.

"Yes, that's so. But as you surely must remember, more than half the building either collapsed or fell into the river. It's likely your father's body was never recovered because it ended up crushed or buried at the bottom of the Miskatonic, along with so many other helpless souls. No one could have survived that."

Unless they were a demon.

It was that thought that convinced me of my own foolishness. My father may have been evil, definitely insane, but he'd been perfectly human. Whatever stalked the streets of Innsmouth was no more my father than I was a murderer.

I thanked Morgan and rang off, my relief tempered by the rest of my problems. I still had no clue as to what the creature was or when it would come for me again. I'd need to stay on guard and pray that Flannery and his goons did their job quickly.

The idea that my life rested in the hands of the mustachioed inspector and the rest of the Innsmouth police engendered no sense of security in my breast. While most of the coppers I knew were decent men at heart, few of

them had enough wits to outsmart a child, let alone find a skulking fiend who might or might not be in league with the Devil himself.

Stopping the beast might end up being my responsibility after all.

That frightened me more than being stalked. It was one thing to take matters into my own hands with a common thief. Quite another to seek a confrontation with something not of this earth, something that was looking to end my life.

And well capable of doing it. Every victim had been of a size much greater than my own and well versed in self-defense.

Why, I'd be among them now if not for my gun.

I patted my coat pocket and took a small comfort from the feel of the weapon resting there. From this point on I'd go nowhere without it. Demons they might be, inhabiting the bodies of men, but I'd already proven they could be killed. Those things in the pub had fallen fast enough when I filled their skulls with lead. And fire seemed to do the trick as well.

Still, I didn't feel safe until I reached Ben Olmstead's place on Babson Street. Even then, I kept glancing over my shoulder while waiting for Ben to answer the bell.

Only two blocks farther away from the waterfront than my own house, Ben's neighborhood demonstrated how rapidly fortunes can change within a few streets. Streetlamps were more frequent, the road relatively clean of litter, and hardly any empty storefronts or broken windows marred the look of the buildings.

Ben's small but neat set of rooms offered a single gentleman all he could want at a fraction of the cost for a flat in the center of town. Parlor, kitchen, and two bedrooms, plus a wash closet he shared with the person who lived across the hall. The building sat in close proximity to several alehouses and dining establishments, which made sense for a bachelor with little time or inclination for cooking. It also boasted a long-widowed landlord happy to turn a blind eye at certain indiscretions in return for a few extra quarters a month.

Such as an unattached man with a woman neither his wife nor a relative staying with him.

"How is she feeling?" I asked, after placing my hat and coat on a post in the tiny entryway.

"Come see for yourself. Dr. Blair prescribed laudanum and rest, but I fear it's not helping."

I followed Ben to the guest room and had to choke back a gasp when I saw Flora.

She lay in bed, blankets drawn to her chin. Her pallid face blended in with the aged gray pillowcase beneath it. Her hair hung in sweaty ropes and the blush of fever shone on her cheeks and nose.

"Flora." I spoke softly, hesitant to wake her but eager to assure myself she wasn't as ill as she appeared. Her eyes opened. Drugs and sickness had drained them of vibrancy, leaving them a dull blue reminiscent of the fishlike orbs of the dead men in the morgue.

Cracked, pale lips opened, flesh splitting even farther as taut skin fought to move.

"Hello, Henry. Where've you been?"

"I've been helping Inspector Flannery." I tossed Ben a quick look. I'd sent a cable before we'd left for Miskatonic, to let them know I hadn't abandoned them in their time of distress. Hadn't Ben told her?

"Sorry, sport," Ben said from his chair on the other side of the bed. "I didn't want to worry her further."

I frowned at him but refrained from saying anything. It made sense; Flora was in very weak condition. But I also wondered if perhaps my old friend didn't have ulterior motives. After all, when Flora regained her strength, she'd remember who sat with her through her illness and who hadn't been around.

That's going to change right now.

"Worry me how?" A hint of Flora's old fire heated her words and it warmed my heart to see it.

"The book I found, remember?" When Flora nodded, I continued. "Flannery and I took it to a professor at Miskatonic. He's going to translate it. It's a book of spells, magic most foul. Professor Gardiner believes—"

"Spells? Oh." Flora clutched at the bedclothes and thrashed her head back and forth. "Demons! The demons."

"Quickly! More laudanum." I placed my weight on her to hold her still and looked at Ben. He handed me a bottle from the small table next to the bed. With deft practice I placed several drops onto Flora's tongue while Ben held her head. In a few moments, her eyes closed and her movements calmed.

"Demons," she whispered. "First Scott, now me. They'll come back…." Her words drifted off as sleep claimed her.

"What was that all about?" With Flora sedated, I unwound her bandage to check her wound. The doctor had done a decent job of stitching the flesh closed, but the skin around it was red and swollen.

"She's been ranting hysterically about demons ever since I brought her here. Nightmares of those…things in the morgue stalking her. And she dreams about Scott. She's convinced the dead will rise and come for all of us, that it's the end of times."

I pursed my lips and shook my head. It all seemed so preposterous. Demons, black magic, corpses rising from graves. Yet the proof—

"—don't think you should come round for a while."

"Wait. What?" Lost in my thoughts, I'd missed part of Ben's words. I looked up from my examination of Flora's wounds.

"I said, I don't think you should come here. At least until Flora is herself again. Your talk of spells and chasing down demons is only going to upset her further."

"So I won't speak of them."

Ben shook his head. "It's not just the words. It's you. You brought these things into our lives, through no fault of your own, it's true," he hurried to add, "but it happened nonetheless. And you would be a constant reminder of that. She's simply too fragile right now."

I studied Ben's face. It held a hard cast I'd never seen on the man before, so very different from his usual devil-may-care grin. The look of a man prepared to fight, even though he didn't want to.

The worst part was, I couldn't argue with him. If, in fact, my presence inflamed Flora's terror the same way her infection inflamed her flesh, then my visiting would do her more harm than good.

"Someone will still need to change her bandages." It was obvious Ben hadn't. The cloth stuck to the oozing wound and stunk of sweat and pus.

Ben nodded. "Come by in the evenings, after supper. I'll make sure she's had her laudanum and is sleeping."

"You'll tell her I was here." My stomach twisted and it took all my will not to shout accusations at him. No matter the truth of what Ben said, we both knew he had another motivation, one that would leave Flora eternally grateful to the man who tended to her throughout her illness.

"Of course, old sport. She'll never doubt the depth of your friendship, and how your medical know-how helped save the day."

This time there was no mistaking Ben's expression. He believed he'd

already won the battle for Flora's heart. He'd tell her how I helped but she'd never understand the sacrifices I made, how it stabbed my very soul not to be with her every moment.

Fire rose up in my belly at the thought of someone other than myself taking Flora as their own. Who in blazes did Ben Olmstead think he was, with his fancy new clothes and patronizing attitude?

Don't expect me to tip my king to you just yet, old friend. We haven't reached that point in our game.

"I suppose it's for the best." I nodded and used a whiskey-soaked cloth to wipe away the pus and crusted fluids from Flora's wound before wrapping it in fresh cloth. When I finished, I saw myself out of the house, murmuring a half-hearted goodbye that Ben returned with equal indifference.

Outside, the sun had set and the fog had thickened to an almost solid wall. With the heavy mist cooling my anger-flushed skin but doing nothing to douse the flames within me, I gave Ben's door a final glare before setting off.

Ben Olmstead thinks he's beaten me. But he's underestimated his opponent. Let him spend his days spooning soup into Flora's mouth and changing her soiled linens. When she's back on her feet, she'll only have eyes for a real hero. The man who avenged her brother's death.

The man who killed the Fish Street Strangler.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

With the morgue closed for the foreseeable future and nothing but an empty house waiting for me, I instead followed State Street to the center of Innsmouth and found a small pub that didn't seem bent on robbing a man of all his wages for a plate of sausage and a pint of ale. One pint led to another and I managed to douse my anger while grousing to anyone who'd listen about so-called friends who'd as soon stab you in the back as help you. By the time I left, the hour was late and the streets dangerously empty.

Although I wobbled a bit on my feet at first, the brisk, damp air cleared my head soon enough and by the time I'd reached my neighborhood I'd regained both balance and enough mental alertness to keep an eye out for would-be cutpurses and other vermin of the shadows.

Which was why I paused before crossing the street to my house. Something about the building seemed…off. Through the intermittent breaks in the mist, I studied the two-story brick structure, trying to determine what had raised my hackles. Finally, I chalked it up to nerves and reached into my pocket for my key.

And stopped as I noticed the line of shadow at the door's edge, where there should be none.

I let go of the key and instead drew my gun with a trembling hand. I had no doubt that I'd closed the door securely before leaving. I remembered clearly sliding the key into the lock and giving the handle a quick pull to make certain the latch caught.

Someone had broken in.

I started across the street and then came to a halt in the middle of the road. Whoever it was might still be inside. The prudent thing would be to call the police.

Bugger that, I thought, remembering the last time I'd been in need of assistance. The bastard would be long gone before the nearest coppers got their lumbering asses here.

My simmering anger caught fire again and burned away any fear. I

raised the gun. Whoever had decided to burgle my house would suffer the consequences, be they man or demon.

Thinking to surprise the intruder, I strode around to the rear of the house rather than go through the front. I opened the back door and was about to step inside when a massive shape careened into me and bowled me over. I tumbled down the two short steps and rolled to my hands and knees just in time to catch a glimpse of a man-sized figure disappearing into the mist.

"Stop!" I felt around for the gun, found it a few feet away. I got up and gave chase, cursing my damned terrible luck and the double-damned fog that enveloped Innsmouth on a constant basis. My quarry never slowed, heading north on Fish Street toward the river. The moisture-laden air muffled the slap of our shoes against the paving stones, making it difficult to keep track of the burglar.

We continued that way for two blocks, my ghostlike quarry moving in unnatural silence. Glimpses of darker shadows and swirling currents in the mist were the only signs of his presence until he reached State Street and paused at the corner. In that moment of hesitation, I caught my first real look at him, the glow of a gas lamp revealing the barest glimpse of his features, hardly more than a silhouette. Yet still enough to inject ice into my veins and freeze me mid-step.

The suggestion of a pale face, a ghostly jellyfish in a sea of gray. Broad shoulders sloping down to arms that gave the impression of abnormal length, much longer than they should be. A coat or cloak of some kind that reached to his knees, fading away into the mist. When the figure turned right and hurried off again, there was a weird cast to his movements, almost as if the man had an extra limb.

Or a tail.

Dread gripped me with an icy hand. I clenched the gun tighter.

Him!

The demon had returned. Most likely to seek out the book again. The memory of that awful visage looming over me did its best to keep me rooted in place but I forced it away. This was what I'd wanted. My chance to take down the Fish Street Strangler and redeem myself with Flora by ridding us of the specter who'd brought so much darkness into our lives.

It won't get away again!

Once more I gave pursuit, knowing I had to stay close or lose my

quarry in the mists. At the end of the block I attempted to train my pistol at the fleeing target but I couldn't aim straight enough to take a shot. Instead, I settled for keeping the gun in hand and putting all my efforts into my legs. Fueled by rage and ale, I ran faster than I ever had before, mist and buildings blending into a gray blur as I kept my eyes focused on the fuzzy outline of the demon.

I was several steps onto the Water Street Bridge before I realized the creature was leading me into Old Innsmouth. My pace slowed as I again considered abandoning the chase. Only fools or criminals crossed the Manuxet River. Especially at night.

This may be your only chance.

I had the demon on the run. I was armed. When would I have an opportunity like that again?

Imagine Flora's face when she hears I not only killed the monster, but ventured into hell itself to do it. She'll forget Ben Olmstead even exists.

I crossed the river and kept going.

With each passing block, with each glimpse of an abnormal, slinking stride, my resolve weakened. I wondered if I'd made a monumental error. Sane folk avoided Old Innsmouth like the very plague that had rendered it inhospitable decades earlier.

Except my damned pride wouldn't allow me to quit. If I turned back I'd forever be the man who lost his nerve, who'd gone yellow when things got dangerous. Instead of being a hero to Flora, I'd be less than nothing, a failure as a man and a friend.

And wouldn't Ben love that? I could hear my supposed chum now. "Poor old Henry. Turned out to be quite the Sally, didn't he?" All the while wearing that simpering grin of his. No, dammit, this was something I had to see through to the finish. No turning back. No going for the police.

Not that I wouldn't appreciate assistance at the moment. Extra eyes and fists would definitely be of benefit if it came down to a physical encounter. There'd be no aid forthcoming, though, so no sense dwelling on the impossible. No police patrol had crossed the bridge in years, not since the people of Innsmouth had, through action if not official decree, abandoned the northern side of the town and allowed it to become a wasteland populated by vermin of both the four- and two-legged variety.

Hike up your britches and get on with it.

Something my father used to say when I didn't want to do my chores.

I'd cease lollygagging, having learned the hard way those words meant there'd be no more warnings. Now that memory spurred me on in a different fashion. If I brought in the demon, it would mean more than just a place in Flora's heart. There'd likely as not be a change in the attitude of the whole town toward me. Wipe away the stain my father's actions had left on the family name.

I'd finally be my own man, a respected citizen, rather than the son of the worst criminal in Innsmouth's history.

There. Something moving amid the gray eddies and darker shadows, up at the next corner. I put on a burst of speed, desperate to close the distance between us. My hand tightened around the handle of the pistol, fighting against the damp air and sweat that threatened to steal the weapon from my grasp.

I rounded the corner and my foot slipped on the slick paving stones, a reminder that Old Innsmouth held dangers besides those of the criminal variety. Thanks to decades of neglect, the buildings and streets had surpassed disrepair and reached a state of crumbling decay that made it hazardous just to walk among them. Only one in four streetlamps still fought a losing battle against the fog. Feral dogs and other wildlife prowled the barren neighborhoods, some with a taste for flesh and all potential carriers of deadly disease.

I regained my balance and regarded the broad width of a once-grand avenue, its tall square buildings monuments to a different time. Behind the curtains of mist, the bricks would be deteriorating and the windows all broken. The stench of decay filled the moisture-laden air, a stomach-churning stew of rot, black fungus, and something worse, an indefinable stink that raised the hairs on my neck.

Which way? The fog had thickened, as if emanating from the buildings themselves, reducing visibility down to mere yards. A muffled sound to my left made me turn, just in time to catch a glimpse of darker black at the entrance to a side street. An impression of something long swinging to one side past two legs.

A coat. Only a coat, you fool. You're not a child, hiding beneath the bedcovers from the boogem-man.

Still, the image of a tail remained in my head and my heart beat faster than my exertions accounted for. I resumed my pursuit, a tad slower now, wary of my quarry lying in wait within the stygian depths.

I needn't have worried. At the next corner, the shadow materialized again, turned right, and vanished into the soupy vapors. He continued to lead me along, taking corners in seemingly random fashion, never close enough for me to get a decent look, never so far ahead that he disappeared for more than a few seconds.

After several minutes, I arrived at yet another intersection and found my way blocked by a gaping chasm in the ground where a huge section of road had collapsed. I stopped a few feet from the edge and paused to catch my breath while I regarded my surroundings.

Dark edifices loomed to my left and right. Once stately, they'd devolved into deadly traps, capable of swallowing a careless visitor unlucky enough to step on a weakened floor or fail to see a missing stair.

A muted thud emerged from the atmospheric shroud, leaving me with the impression of a door closing nearby. I eyed the obscured buildings, unsure of which direction the noise emanated from. Nothing moved. The idea that I'd been lured into an ambush returned to me, bringing with it a shiver that had nothing to do with the damp sea air.

Cursing myself for a fool, I moved toward the closest building, shuffling my feet to avoid tripping over any unseen obstacles. For the first time since entering Old Innsmouth, I wondered how I'd get back to the other side of the river. Three bridges joined the two sections of the town, but at the moment I had no idea which was closest or which direction it lay in. The idea of being lost seemed absurd; I couldn't be more than a few minutes' walk to safety.

Or could I? If the fog could play hell with my sense of direction when it came to pinpointing a sound, I might be just as confused about distance and not even know it.

Give it up. Go home before you are well and truly lost.

The time had come to admit defeat. Personal pride no longer mattered; now the only important thing was to get home again with my skin intact. I turned and stared back the way I'd come.

Which way led home?

Moisture ran into my eyes and I blinked it away. Wary of anyone sneaking up on me, I put my back against the building for safety's sake. This far into the dead heart of Old Innsmouth, weeds and lichen had a firm hold on everything, not only overgrowing the paving stones but sprouting through gaps in the mortar of walls and stairs. Cold, fetid air

wafted down from the empty holes where windows once looked out onto bustling streets.

I moved a few steps to my right and stopped, halted by indecision. Was it the correct direction? Spending the hours until dawn wandering decrepit streets held little appeal. That's if I lived to see the dawn. Who knew what depraved scoundrels might be eyeing me even now, ready to take my life and wallet with a flick of a blade.

Think logically. As it so often did, my mind provided the advice in my father's voice.

I took a deep breath to calm myself. Logic, yes. All I needed was to locate one point of reference. And all the ones I knew would be near the river. So, if I could determine which direction the river lay, it would be a simple matter of just heading east toward the harbor until I came to either Federal Street or Water Street and followed them to their bridges.

Keeping my back firmly against the wall, I inched toward the front of the building while doing my best to ignore the slime fouling my coat. The street signs that once stood at the corner were long gone, thanks to the anarchy and looting following the town's descent into chaos in the aftermath of the plague. Bemoaning my decision to pursue the demon, I edged around the building and slowly followed the wall until I came to a rusted iron railing and a wide set of brick stairs that rose crag-like from the vapors. At the top, a dark rectangle showed at the entrance to the manmade edifice. Above it sat a faded sign, only the first part still legible: Marsh Canning and

My attention returned to the open door. The entrances to all the other buildings I'd passed were either closed or the doors missing; none had stood ajar.

I remembered the sound I'd heard earlier. Perhaps someone pulling open a warped door rather than closing one? The stranger could be inside, prepared to waylay the man imprudent enough to forego the safety of Innsmouth on a wild goose chase.

As if in response to my thoughts, a muffled clattering broke the silence, followed by a hoarse grunt and then a single word.

"Damn."

My jaw tightened. What demon cursed like a man? Shame burned my cheeks. How stupid I'd been! 'Twas not a monster at all. In my head, the pale-faced creature with the inhuman tail morphed into something

completely different and far less terrifying. A mad scientist in a dank underground laboratory, performing twisted experiments on corpses until he discovered a way to reanimate the dead.

A fellow who deserved to get his arse kicked – or shot! – for the trouble he'd caused.

Science, not magic, lay at the heart of things, as I should have known it always did.

With renewed determination, I climbed the stairs. Cracks, some several feet long, created mosaic patterns in the brick and made the footing treacherous. I avoided the worst of them and stepped inside, where an offensive odor slapped my face in greeting. Waving in vain at the rank stench, I moved carefully through an enormous space. A warehouse or factory, abandoned like so many others in the days of the plague's aftermath. On the second floor, rows of large windows, most of them empty of glass, allowed in just enough light so that I wasn't completely blind.

Ahead, a stack of crates loomed like a miniature pyramid in the murk. One of them had fallen over.

The sound I'd heard before the muttered curse? Perhaps someone watching me, someone who'd gotten careless?

A series of obscure marks in the grime caught my eye, leading from the door to the crates and then into the depths of the building, where the darkness claimed them. From the looks of the tracks, either more than one person had entered or the building was frequented on a regular basis.

I moved forward, my feet kicking up filth and spores that turned into malignant clouds. With each step, the stink grew worse, a fetid mix of dead fish and human waste that soon forced me to cover my nose with my arm to block the stench.

Several yards in, the tracks grew more distinct. I lit a match and knelt close to examine them as best I could. Something about them seemed… odd.

Definitely footprints, with an occasional smudge between them that sometimes obliterated part of the tracks. A man, walking fast, the hem of a long, wide coat touching the ground now and then. A large foot for sure, much wider in the front, with strange protuberances. Almost like….

The claws of an animal.

Once the thought took hold, I couldn't shake it. A flattened, paddle-

shaped, webbed foot, with five claws extending out. The creature's tail swinging behind it, occasionally bumping or dragging….

Somewhere ahead, the unmistakable slam of a door echoed through the cavernous space. I looked up. The tracks continued on, leading deeper into the unknown.

Man or demon, I'm coming for you.

Pistol aimed forward, I continued on, alert for any signs of movement. I did my best to avoid looking too closely at the prints after that. When they faded back into obscure smudges, blending in with all the others on the floor, a sense of relief came over me and I increased my pace.

The trail ended at a small door with a broken window. To my left, an entire section of wall had collapsed, which earned my gratitude as it allowed fresh air to dilute the omnipresent reek of death and decay. It also provided a touch of light, which enabled me to see what lay beyond the door: a small landing that led to a downward staircase. As I reached for the knob, a whisper of voices drifted up. Indistinct, but most definitely spoken words.

I hesitated, my hand in midair. It would be much darker at the bottom of those stairs, and therefore more dangerous. I only had a few matches in my box. And who knew if one of the voices belonged to the Fish Street Strangler or just some common cutthroat and his cronies?

It doesn't matter. This thought, more than anything, broke my paralysis. I had to see this fool's errand through to the end. I pushed open the door just enough to squeeze through and crept across the landing to the stairs. Halfway down, the last vestiges of light disappeared. Rather than give myself away by striking a match, I descended the rest of the way like a blind man, keeping my free arm against the wall as a guide. When both wall and stairs came to an end, I stopped and slowly spread my arms out.

Nothing.

Once more, I considered using my matches and chose not to, having no desire to make myself an obvious target. With no idea of what kind of space I stood in, I settled for shuffling forward three steps, wary of holes in the floor or objects blocking my way. I repeated this tedious strategy twice and then stopped again.

Now what? My eyes had not grown accustomed to the dark at all; the lightless cave extended in unknown distances around me. Moving in tiny increments, it could take me all night to explore the space, and even then,

what would I learn? Unless the demon allowed me to walk right into it, the damned thing could be right beside me and I'd never know.

That thought immediately brought to mind visions of dead men and women lined up just out of arm's reach, waiting their master's command to fall on me and rip me to pieces.

I strained to hear any sounds but all I perceived was the thump-thump-thump of my own heart and a high-pitched whistling from my nose as I breathed. Nothing overly loud, but I assumed any self-respecting demon – or criminal – would hear me a mile away. Not to mention smell me, as I took in the nose-wrinkling odor of sweat from beneath my raised arms. The pungent reek informed me I'd not be wearing this particular suit again anytime soon. My man-stink was so strong it nearly overpowered the odors of the long-vacant building, a mix of sour mold and dead fish that—

Dead fish? No!

My heart banged against my ribs as I recognized that particular odor. I turned to run for the stairs. If I could make it back to the relative brightness of the upper level—

A heavy blow struck my back and I fell forward, landing hard on rough wood that scraped my arms and face. I tried to twist around and aim my pistol but an unseen hand stripped the weapon from me. I crawled forward, scraping my arms in the process. Splinters dug into my flesh, the stinging pain barely registering in my terrified state. I collided with the bottom of the staircase and grabbed at the first step. Something coiled around my leg. A pinprick stabbed my calf and a wave of dizziness overcame me. I tried to lift my hands to reach the next stair but waves of nausea tore conscious thought away and brought forth a maelstrom of confusion in my skull.

"I knew you would come, Henry. It's been too long, my son."

The deep voice pinned me in place like an insect pegged to a board. The world shrank around me until all that remained was the echo of those words in my brain.

No! It can't be – supposed to be—

The whirlpool grew stronger, pulled me down into a warm, black sea, deeper, deeper, until nothing remained but a single word.

Father?

And then even that was gone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There was a moment when I thought time itself might have stopped, the Earth frozen in place by some cosmic magic spell. No air moved through my lungs. My heart hung suspended between beats. Absolute silence lay upon the world. In that total absence of sensation a curious whine filled my ears, reminiscent of distant summer grasshoppers at dusk.

Then the voice spoke again and shattered my stasis.

"Henry. Good, you're awake."

My eyes opened of their own accord and I let out a gasp at what I saw.

Surely I'd died and gone to hell.

Not ten feet away stood two corpses, their gray eyes reflecting the flickering light so they appeared to be blinking rapidly. A foul reek emanated from the dead men, yet it didn't churn my stomach any more than the bodies I worked with in the morgue, which told me I'd grown used to the odor, a rather frightening thought. How long had I been incapacitated while they stood there watching me with their opaque eyes?

Behind them, a wide cavern stretched into darkness, the stone walls illuminated by lamps set on poles or hanging from hooks. The ground, comprised of the same ancient rock, was damp and cold against my body. Abhorrent shapes crawled in queer patterns across the rock walls and I shivered when I realized they weren't living creatures but rather the same vile symbols that had come alive on the ancient pillars I'd seen at Miskatonic. Just like the last time, the gruesome images cavorted in peculiar rhythms, their forms somehow immoral to the eye.

I sat up and immediately regretted the decision. The cave spun around me and I let out a moan. One of the dead men took a step forward. Despite my light-headedness, I pushed myself away, not stopping until I'd put several more body lengths between me and them.

"They won't hurt you. I swear it."

The sepulchral voice came from the shadows to my left. I couldn't help

another sharp inhalation of breath at those words. There was no mistaking their origin.

My father.

Unimaginable, but true. The intonation, although deeper and rougher, was his. Each sentence delivered with the same cadence, the same touch of patronizing superiority. Silas Gilman had always considered himself smarter than everyone else around him. It was that arrogant belief that sent him down a path to madness and eventually imprisonment.

I slowly shifted in the direction of the voice, not wanting to see yet having to see. Invisible steel bindings squeezed my chest and my bowels twisted painfully.

A long oval head, bereft of hair and no longer hidden by a bowler hat, glowed like an obscene white egg in the lamplight. Two ragged slits gaped where the nose should have been, edges widening and closing with each cycle of air. My father's once-full lips had withered to thin colorless ridges of flesh that seemed to stretch from one shrunken, circular ear to the other. And the eyes….

Black pupils floated in a sea of mustard yellow, each a different shape, one a crooked oval and the other a dented sphere.

It only took a single encounter with those inhuman orbs to know that hell most assuredly existed.

The creature – I couldn't yet think of it as my own sire – spoke again, revealing multiple rows of sharp, deadly teeth that would have been well at home in the mouth of a shark or some other dreadful sea creature.

"Henry, do you know who I am?"

I nodded. A dozen questions fought to be asked, but only one emerged, hoarse and weak, from my dry, cracked lips.

"How?"

That single word encompassed so many possibilities.

"I'll tell you everything. But first, believe me when I say that you are safe here. There are things I need to show you, things you can't imagine, but you mustn't be afraid. Come, walk with me."

A pale hand reached down. The long fingers that had once deftly sutured wounds and mixed medicines now had fine webbing between their bases and black claws at the tips.

I recoiled at the sight, my stomach churning at the thought of touching that inhuman flesh. Instead, I pushed myself to my feet, fighting through

a momentary dizziness. I glanced around for my gun but saw no sign of it, and I didn't bother to ask. The desire to escape, to just run into the darkness beyond the lamps, nearly overwhelmed me. The only thing that kept me from fleeing was the acceptance that if my father wanted me dead, surely he'd have done the deed already. And he could just as easily stop me before I covered a dozen paces.

Still, as I fell into step beside him, it took all my effort to cling to logical thought when my entire being wanted to give in to my terror.

"I've both anticipated and dreaded this moment since that night in the alley. I never…I hadn't planned on revealing myself to you. Not until I was ready. And not in that manner."

Thoughts raced in my head, making it hard to concentrate on his words. That it was my father I no longer had any doubt. Buried within the rough tones were all of Silas Gilman's mannerisms, down to his choice of phrases. If I closed my eyes I could almost imagine I'd stepped back in time, that I was again a child engaged in one of our typical father–son conversations where he would espouse his opinions and impart words of wisdom.

"There are no such things as demons." Too late, I realized I'd spoken aloud. The pallid face turned toward me, inhuman eyes widening just a bit before Silas looked forward again.

"I remember when I first told you that. You were only seven, perhaps eight. Still afraid of boogems under the bed. I told you that science is the only real truth. I believed it then, and I believe it now. I remain dedicated to facts, not fantasy. But I have learned many things since then, things beyond the ken of man, things our science cannot explain. I have changed, in more than just the physical sense."

Silas came to a stop and placed his arm in front of me, blocking my way. My heart gave a jump when I saw that just past us the ground ended in a sharp drop-off. In the near-dark, my mind on things other than where I was walking, I would have stepped right over the edge. I cursed myself for not paying attention. I needed to keep my wits about me if I wanted to survive.

The gentle susurration of flowing water drifted up from the ebon depths, but the peculiar acoustics of the cavern made it impossible to tell if we stood above a small stream close by or a river hundreds of feet down. The air, already damp and chill to begin with, gave no clue.

"I was wrong about one thing, though. Demons do exist. And I

found one. Or rather, one found me." Silas picked up a lamp from the ground and lit it. Holding it over the edge, he motioned for me to step forward.

Wary of a trick – a quick push to send me tumbling to my death – I moved closer to the edge. After another glance at Silas, who merely stood there, I peered into the abyss.

The cliff wasn't as high as I'd anticipated, perhaps twenty or thirty feet. At the bottom, a flat area bordered an underground river easily as large as the Manuxet, which I gathered flowed somewhere above us and somehow fed into this one. Or perhaps both shared a common source. Wide enough so that the feeble light failed to illuminate the other shore, it appeared from darkness to our left and disappeared into the stygian depths to our right, with only a section of a few hundred feet visible to my eyes.

The lamplight reflected off the smooth, unbroken surface, except in one place where the dark, vaguely round shape of a sandbar or large rock jutted from the water not far from shore. The stench of rotten fish and stagnant swamp was much stronger here, bold enough to overpower the lingering taint of death in my nose.

Alert for any movement, I peered down. I believed my father when he said he'd discovered a demon. The very changes to his form spoke of some supernatural experience. I certainly had no desire to suffer a similar fate. If something from the depths of hell lurked below, I intended to stay as far from it as possible.

Except all I saw was shoreline and river.

I stared harder, seeking any signs of life. A glimpse of hellfire-red eyes, perhaps, or a shadow moving within the murky grays and blacks. After all, a demon would most assuredly be lurking in the gloom. The guttering of the lamp made every ripple, every protuberance, shift and writhe, creating ghostly images that had my eyes darting in all directions on wild goose chases.

Finally, exasperation won over fear and I turned to Silas.

"I see nothing. Where is this demon?"

"Sometimes that which we seek is hidden in plain sight. You're as I once was, blinded by a perception of the world that imposes limits on itself. You must learn to open both your eyes and your mind. Behold."

Silas stepped right to the edge and raised his voice.

"Show yourself, 'Fhalma."

The river flowed on, its surface black ice highlighted by glimmers of yellow torchlight that—

A hint of movement? Yes, something had changed. Ripples, barely noticeable, marred the smooth surface. I sought their origin but found nothing amiss, just the shore and sandbar the same as they'd been.

No, not the same.

The sandbar seemed…larger. Before it had been barely long enough for two people to lie on; now it was easily twice that size and still growing, an island where there hadn't been one before. Perhaps the river's level was sinking...but no, nothing anywhere else had changed.

Irregular shapes broke the surface around the dark mass, the arched roots of some long-buried tropical tree suddenly sprouting from the soil.

"Behold."

I glanced at my father, whose attention remained focused on the island, his grotesquely transformed face even more horrific for the smile pulling his peculiar lips tighter. Unable to contemplate those alien features for more than a moment, I turned back to the scene below.

A giant eye stared up at me.

Wide as a man's spread arms, a black orb floated in a sea of orange fire tainted with streaks of bile yellow. Filled with cold hatred for all that was good, it regarded me in the same soulless manner a bestial sea creature, a great leviathan or kraken possessed of less emotion than a reptile, might eye its next meal.

"Jesus God!" My heart gave a painful shudder. One hand clutching my chest, I fell to my knees as my legs gave out. Silas grabbed my arm, held me steady while the world tipped and spun around me.

I wanted to flee, to cry, to scream for God to save me. But I had no strength; I could only kneel there at the edge of the abyss, gripped by one demon while another waited below to drag me to Hades. For surely that was its intent. The end of times was upon us, the gates of hell open and the Apocalypse about to begin. And me at the edge of the River Styx, about to undertake a nightmare journey to the netherworld.

Unable to move, to even look away, I remained captured by the thing's vile gaze. Worse than uncaring, it was malevolent, immoral even. Its very presence degraded the soul, cast a beam of wicked sin and corruption wherever it turned.

The beast rose farther from the river, exposing more of its dreadful

form, and some of the roots it lay nestled among twisted and writhed, perhaps the nerves and filaments of that giant eye, squirming and wriggling in the waters of that unnamed river. Then I saw the circular shapes on their undersides and everything became terribly clear.

The giant eye. The black dome behind it. A body immersed in water. Snakelike appendages. Taken together, an unmistakable impression formed in my brain. An enormous squid languishing in the shallows, perfectly disguised as it waited for unwary prey to happen by. Tentacles whipping out to snare the unlucky beast.

Here was the root of all the evil plaguing Innsmouth of late. How, I could not yet say, for without doubt the behemoth below was far too large to stalk the streets unseen, even on the foggiest of nights. But I remembered all too well the squid-like things bursting from the chests of the corpses in the morgue. Offspring of this monster, hatched within the bodies like maggots in a dead animal? Or perhaps invaders, parasites that attached to their hosts like repulsive, many-armed leeches. Did more of the creatures lie within the waters of the poisoned river, just waiting to enter an innocent victim…?

Like my father?

I turned toward Silas, found him already staring down at me with eyes frighteningly similar to that of the demon in the river.

"In God's name—"

He cut me off with a wicked grin.

"A god, yes, but not one you or I ever dreamed of."

"What have you done?"

"It is not what I've done, Henry. It's what I've become."

Faster than my eyes could follow, a sinuous limb whipped out and wrapped around my arm. The rubbery tentacle tightened with bone-crushing strength. My heart nearly stopped when what I'd thought a cloak draped over my father's shoulders suddenly spread wide, revealing itself as a pair of membranous wings.

The tip of the pseudopod rose up, regarding me with a blind, eyeless gaze. A sucker on its underside opened, exposing a circular mouth with a translucent, fleshy tongue from which protruded a needlelike stinger.

"No, please…." The words seemed to come from somewhere else other than me. A gray cloud had descended over me, muffling sound and vision. The loathsome thing before me grew blurry and the ground tilted.

I reeled at the edge of sanity, everything I'd ever believed in shattered and tumbling into the darkness. I closed my eyes, gave up. I wanted no more of this world, this life. Let them take me away, lock me in a cell forever. Just like—

"Join me, Henry. Together we can rule the world."

Join him? Never! Did I say that aloud? I tried again. Better to die than—

"Goodbye, Henry."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I woke to the horrific stench of the demon's lair, rotten fish and decomposing human flesh thick and heavy with each heaving breath I took. I sat up with a hoarse cry, convinced I still lay in the cave, a prisoner of the abomination my father had become. Or worse, its next victim.

Frantic, I looked in all directions, alert for any movement. Dim light illuminated the room, which I belatedly noticed was my own. The familiar outlines of my furniture alleviated my terror slightly. I calmed even further when I saw I was alone, the lingering stench of death and demon on my clothes my only companion.

I made to push myself up and a sharp throbbing in my wrist reminded me of the repulsive tentacle that had held me in its grasp. My dread came rushing back. Had my father injected me with his deadly venom? Was I even now harboring some parasitic creature within me, pregnant with his foul offspring?

I jumped from the bed and ran to the window, pushed aside the curtains to examine my arm in the grayish light of another dreary morning. Mottled bruises wound across my skin. To the untrained eye it would appear I'd been tied with ropes and struggled, but I knew better. I opened the drawers of my dresser in panic-fueled haste, casting combs and jewelry to the floor until I found what I needed: a personal magnifying glass.

My hand shook like a victim of palsy as I moved the glass over my injured flesh. Halfway along, I spotted a black dot in the middle of a purplish-green band.

A puncture!

The glass dropped from my hand and I gripped the windowsill as my heart stuttered in my chest and blood pounded in my temples. The room closed in around me and I fought to keep from fainting.

Infected! My own father, bastard creature that he was, had delivered a death sentence to me.

I stumbled toward the door, my only thought to find him, beg him for an antidote, plead for his master to remove the thing inside me and—

I barked my shin against the nightstand and cursed. The stand tumbled over, spilling an assortment of objects to the floor. A book, my reading glasses, my gun….

My gun? And next to it, several sheets of paper, folded in half.

I went cold at the sight. I'd written no letters to anyone. And the pistol…in my jumbled memories, my father had taken that weapon from me. Yet here it was.

Up to that point, I'd assumed I'd somehow gotten myself home, after…after Silas did whatever he'd done to me, and that I simply didn't remember any of it. Now, though, the odds of that seemed unlikely. Either he or his minions had carried me home, placed me in my bed like a child.

Aching muscles and a fog clouding my thoughts made it difficult to concentrate but I forced myself to retrieve the papers. I tried to unfold them but my hands wouldn't obey. A desperate wish formed in my head. If I didn't read the words contained within those pages, I could almost believe I'd spent the night drinking to excess, that my foray into Old Innsmouth and subsequent encounter with my father were merely an alcohol-fueled delusion.

Except the marks on my arm gave lie to that. No figment of my imagination had injured me.

Despite my nearly uncontrollable desire to crawl back into bed, I opened the papers.

A letter, the pages scrawled in handwriting still as recognizable to me as my own.

Henry,

I trust you slept well? Fear not, you remain as human as you were before you sought me out. I merely rendered you unconscious. The time may come when you ask for the gift of godhood, but first you must know the truth of what happened to me.

I did not seek this metamorphosis, but I welcome it. What you consider an obscene transformation has in reality left me greater than I was. No longer human, but more than human. Had I known of this power when your mother yet lived, things would have turned out so differently for all of us.

My mistake was in trusting traditional science. When your mother became *ill, I knew I didn't have much time to find a cure. The damned cancer would rot her from*

the inside out, eat her organs until nothing remained but a shell, replacing all that was good with intolerable pain that not even morphine would quell.

I spent every free moment in the library, researching that abominable disease. Only when medical texts yielded no answers did my desperation lead me to places that a man of my training wouldn't normally consider. I scoured ancient treatises on herbalism and from there I even ventured into alchemy. Things that only months earlier I would have laughed at as superstitious twaddle. No longer, though. Nothing else mattered, not my reputation, not my preconceived notions. Nothing except finding a cure I grew more convinced didn't exist. I ignored my practice. Ignored you, too, in my quest to keep our family together. For that, I apologize.

Then, on yet another late night, while entrenched in my study surrounded by stacks of useless books, I came across the answer I'd been seeking. It had been staring me right in the face the whole time! A work of fiction that stoked a revelation in my mind.

Those words brought back an unwanted memory, one that had haunted me throughout the years, causing many a nightmare. My mother laid open like a gutted pig, blood staining the bed and floor, my father hands-deep inside her.

I'd played Bluebeard's wife and opened the forbidden door after my father instructed me to remain downstairs. It had been my screams that brought the police. That hadn't been my intention. At the time, I thought my father had attempted a desperate surgery. My cries came not from the horror of what he'd done, but that he'd failed to save her. For even I, just a child, could see she was dead.

My father had grabbed me with blood-drenched hands and pushed me into the hallway, then shut the door. I'd stayed there, calling for him, until the police showed up. I was overlooked in the confusion, as they dragged my father kicking and screaming from the house.

"You must let me finish! I can bring her back."

"You've done enough, you bloody Frankenstein," one of them said. Then someone finally noticed me standing there and ushered me away with an admonition to "Don't look, sonny."

I didn't listen to him any more than I had my father. What child would? I was frightened, confused, but I couldn't look away. Not even when the police carried my mother out to the waiting morgue wagon, a gruesome package wrapped in bloody sheets. That was the last time I'd seen her. I'd

been a doctor's son long enough to know she wasn't returning.

So great was my grief that I hardly noticed the other stained, dripping bundles the police removed. In my shock, I mistook them for bloody sheets.

It was only later that I found out the truth. First from the neighborhood children – who heard it from their parents – then from the headlines in the newspapers when the details became public.

Even during his trial, my father maintained that if the police hadn't stopped him he'd have brought my mother back to life, using electricity and tonics. It was that insistence that earned him a lifetime sentence to the loony bin instead of prison.

Was this letter, then, a confession of sorts? Or an explanation for how he'd come to be…whatever he was? I continued reading, despite the unwanted funereal memories his words stirred up.

Sadly, my revelation ended in failure. At the time, I was convinced the fault was not in the process, but rather my own lack of skill. Truly, to attempt something on such a grand scale without prior practice…my crime was not one of malice or evil, just a lack of training. If I'd had more time….

Or perhaps it was destined all along, Fate pulling her strings even that far back, contriving to set me on a path that landed me in Arkham.

Sitting in that appalling place, locked away forever from you, from the world, surrounded by madmen, pestilence, and sadistic workers, my anger at the fools who'd put me there festered inside me, became my own cancer. How dare they? I made a vow to escape, to make them all pay, and although it took longer to carry out than I'd planned, in the end I managed to take my leave. Although not in the manner I'd intended.

Not in the manner he'd intended? To say the least. The events of that day remained firmly rooted in my memories as well. Why shouldn't they? His actions at Arkham had prompted my rapid dismissal from medical school, added another layer of tarnish to the family name and, in a convoluted way, led me to my present unwelcome situation.

I'd been asleep, like most good people in the hours between two and three in the morning, when the explosion occurred. A thunderous roar that shook the ground for more than twenty miles in every direction, with Arkham at the epicenter. Buildings trembled hard enough to tumble shelves and set dogs to howling. Wrenched from my dreams, I'd stumbled to the window of my dormitory room and seen an orange glow painting the sky.

At the time, I assumed a factory had exploded. It took several hours before I learned the truth.

The tremendous blast had destroyed almost half of Arkham Sanitarium.

I expected to feel remorse at the idea my father was most likely dead, yet all I felt was an empty kind of relief, as if a great weight had been removed from my shoulders and I still wasn't used to its absence.

My sense of losing my long-suffered burden was short-lived. The following day the police showed up at my room to inform me my father had caused the explosion that sent half the building into the Manuxet River, and in doing so took the lives of more than one hundred doctors, nurses, and patients along with his own.

I had no words for them; had I not been inured to receiving terrible news by the events of my childhood, I might have fainted right there. Instead, all I could do was collapse into my chair and shake my head in disbelief. Even in my shock, it wasn't lost on me how the officers cast disgusted looks my way before taking their leave. In their minds, Silas and I were two of a kind, the depraved son already following the father's despicable path. No doubt I'd end up using my medical training for something even more atrocious, more deviant. It's in the blood, I could almost hear them say. I held back my sobs in their presence, for fear they'd think I cried for him. It was only after they left that I buried my face in my pillow, staining the starched fabric with snot and tears as I wept for all those innocent people sent to horrible deaths by the bastard who'd sired me.

A week later, the Gilman name still held sway in the newspaper headlines and I was heading back to Innsmouth, once again a pariah through no fault of my own. Expelled from school because of the poisoned legacy attached to my name.

My hands clenched around my father's letter as all my old resentment rose up again. I threw the papers onto the bed, kicked over the nightstand, and pounded my hands against the wall. Not content to ruin my life twice, he'd now returned to do it a third time, to….

Cold dread washed over me, dousing my anger. He'd returned, yes. A vile beast, a thing that shouldn't exist. A hell-spawn roaming the streets, committing murders…for what purpose?

"I hadn't planned on revealing myself to you. Not until I was ready."

Did his dreadful plans involve me somehow? To what end? I'd thought to go to the police, tell them everything, let them deal with him and his

army of the walking dead. But now? Would they misconstrue his intentions for consensual association on my part? Would they even believe my tale, as farfetched as it was?

Before I went to Flannery with the letter, I had to read the entire thing, be sure nothing in it incriminated me in any manner.

I reluctantly smoothed out the papers and put them back in order, damning my father and his whole lineage as I did so. I had no desire to read another word, yet what choice did I have?

Fire is a tricky thing. I intended it to be a distraction, a minor emergency to occupy the attendants while I made my escape, but it spread faster than I anticipated and found some volatile chemicals in one of the storage rooms. The entire structure collapsed around me as I made my way through a basement tunnel I'd discovered. I should have been crushed, buried alive. Instead, the ancient floor gave way and I fell, battered by stone and earth, surrounded by fire, tumbling and screaming for so long I thought it might never end, that I would plummet for all eternity.

How far? A hundred feet? Two hundred? When I struck the water it might as well have been rock. The impact tore my breath from me and shattered my legs. I heard them snap, felt the agony even through the shock of the ice-cold water.

Broken and burned, I had no strength to move my arms and I sank into the dark depths, death closing in on me.

And then she found me.

I closed my eyes. I had a terrible fear I knew what came next. What the she was that he referred to.

The beast I'd seen. The behemoth residing beneath our town.

The slumbering giant. She Who Waits in the Shadows. I saw her, in all her massive glory. At first I knew only confused terror. I felt sure my impending death had robbed me of my senses, that the water in my lungs and the blood leaking from my wounds had stolen my sanity.

Then she touched me.

In that moment, I knew the terrible truth. I'd been wrong all those years. Good and Evil did exist. There I was, in the grasp of a hideous creature from the very depths of Hades, about to become victim to that which I'd scoffed at as superstition.

But instead of taking my life, she saved it.

Saved it? I couldn't liken the image of the demon in the river to anything

with compassion. Then I remembered my father's ghastly features. Perhaps the creature had saved his life, but at what price?

And for what reason?

Silas's next words answered my question and confirmed my worst fears.

Powerful limbs lifted me up from the water that I might breathe. I was badly injured, my body so wrapped in pain I never felt the sting of her kiss. But what happened next, that I felt. In every fiber of my being.

Her essence flowed through me!

It burned, those alien fluids. Boiling liquids surging through my veins, my muscles. A thousandfold worse than all my other injuries.

It was too much for me. Overwhelmed, I descended into a deep sleep, deeper than any coma. Much like a frog in a pond or a larva in a cocoon, I went into a type of hibernation, unaware of time passing.

When I woke, I lay on the shore of the river.

Healed.

Whatever elixir she used on me, my flesh was repaired, my broken limbs straight and strong again. But the miracle didn't stop there. Her magic had also opened my mind to hers. Allowed me to see through her eyes, to know what she knew.

But not everything.

For like me, she was injured. A great fire in the past, wrought by small-minded people who couldn't understand the gifts she had to offer. Since then she'd lain there, dormant. Waiting for someone to come along, someone who could help her finish her work, what she'd been sent here to accomplish.

In order to do this, she'd passed on to me, her chosen son, something of herself. Her lifeblood, her very essence. I died a man, and months later woke as something else. Something better.

I was no longer human, but an amalgam of two races. Do you remember your studies of ancient Greece and Rome? The tales of demigods such as Achilles, Hercules, Memnon, Aeneas, the products of couplings between gods and humans? I have become such a thing, Henry. No longer mortal. Her blood gave me life and her seed made me what you saw tonight. Her vessel of destiny.

Oh, the things I have seen and learned! We humans are but infants in this universe. There are uncountable worlds beyond this one, and creatures that can cross the infinite spaces between them. Places where gods rule and

wage war at the cosmic level. They control sciences beyond our wildest dreams, have abilities so greater than ours that to us they would seem like magic. Just as the creatures themselves would seem as demons to our feeble intellects. Natural or supernatural become meaningless terms because we cannot comprehend the magnitude of possibilities in this universe.

Heaven and hell exist, my son, but they are just two dimensions among millions.

I no longer knew what to think. This creature had destroyed what little sanity remained in my father, turned him into an abomination. Yet some part of him remained. I could see it in his choice of words, I'd heard it in his voice when he spoke to me in that cavern of the profane. The old Silas slipping through, the one who'd never suffered those of lesser intelligence and always followed his beliefs as if they were absolute truths. The same arrogant confidence that made him a superior surgeon also made him the worst type of madman.

The kind that wrote what I read next.

We have a plan, she and I. To remake the world.

That is why I needed the book. In it are the equations – spells, you would call them – I require that will enable me to truly control life and death, to bring about a new world with me as its king and the Star Mother the holy queen. In eons past, she passed that knowledge on to other disciples, but time and injury have robbed her of too many memories. I – we – need the book to finish what she started when she came to this world. This she has promised me, and now it shall be.

And I want you to be a part of it, Henry. You are still my son. I've already given you the gift of life, but I cannot spare you from what's to come if you choose not to stand with me.

Think of it! Father, Mother, and First Son. A holy trinity that will rule over everything. Join me, Henry. I will be waiting for you. But do not delay your decision. Things move forward now. I have the book again, and with it I will return the Mother to her throne and take my seat beside her, so that we may open the doorway between the worlds. Three nights I will wait before I begin to call forth the dead, and if you have not come to me by then, I recommend you remove yourself as far from Innsmouth as possible.

Join him? That was what he wanted? For me to become like him, a blasphemous thing, part human, part…monster? Demon?

No! I could never. I'd sooner die than allow myself to be transformed into an ungodly creature such as he.

And die I might. His warning was quite clear. In three nights, he and his army of the dead would rise up and…what? Take over Innsmouth? Slaughter all those who refused to bow down before him?

I recommend you remove yourself as far from Innsmouth as possible.

A picture came to me, hordes of dead people crossing the bridges into Innsmouth, emerging from sewers and tunnels right in the heart of town, my father urging them on as they commenced their attack on the unsuspecting populace. How many undead things had he created? Dozens? Hundreds?

How many would he need?

I'd seen firsthand how hard they were to kill. Our pitiful police force would put some of them down, and plenty of citizens owned guns. But my father knew the town, and despite his physical changes still remained a man of high intelligence. He wouldn't just march his army down the main street. He would have a plan, use stealth as a weapon.

The good people of Innsmouth wouldn't even know what was happening until it was too late.

Remove yourself as far from Innsmouth as possible.

Sound advice. Advice I intended to heed.

My strategy for survival would be a simple one. If my father really had taken the book from Professor Angell's dreadful storage room, there was no time to waste. I didn't have much money in the bank, but I'd been frugal since leaving school and there would be more than enough to reach the far side of the country. Or perhaps England; placing an ocean between myself and the impending plague might be even smarter. From there I could make my way farther inland, to Germany perhaps, or Italy.

Even Africa or India if I had to.

How far would be far enough? Innsmouth would fall, of that I had no doubt. But what town would be next? In which direction would Silas move from there? Would it be a straight line, or would his evil pestilence spread in ever-widening circles, a plague not of disease but demons, infecting everything in its path, and no cure in sight?

And how quickly would the inevitable happen?

Enough! No more chasing my thoughts like a dog trying to catch its tail. I had to act, and quickly.

Had it been only my own safety I worried about, I would have left right then. However, I had someone else to consider.

Flora.

Nothing on earth would get me to abandon her, not even the impending danger of hell opening up beneath the streets of Innsmouth. And since she still remained in Ben Olmstead's protective custody, I would need to convince him as well of the impending danger. Ben could join us when we left the city and started life anew somewhere else, or he could remain behind.

Either way, I wasn't departing without Flora by my side.

And God help Ben Olmstead – or anyone else – who tried to stop me.

Decision made, I stripped out of my befouled clothes, washed quickly, and dressed in good traveling attire: sturdy trousers, a plain white shirt, and both jacket and coat. I didn't bother packing a bag; I'd take care of that later, after I brought Flora to her apartment and retrieved what she needed for an extended trip. Then I would visit the bank and withdraw my meager savings.

I paused long enough to pick up the pile of mail under the slot and toss it onto the entry table. I'd read it later. Or not at all; bills and correspondence no longer mattered. I'd be taking with me everything and everyone I cared about. Let the solicitors worry about the rest.

My only concern was how to convince Ben to let Flora accompany me, without things escalating to physical violence.

I patted my pocket, where my pistol sat loaded and ready.

If it came to that, Ben would not triumph.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I rapped on Ben's door, bracing myself for the expected rejection – after all, we'd agreed I'd send word first so he could dose Flora with laudanum beforehand. I feared he might send me away, if he even bothered to answer the door.

"Henry! Thank God. Where in the seven hells have you been?"

His intense relief unnerved me and I almost told him what had happened, but at the last moment I changed my mind. There'd be no way to tell my story quickly, and no guarantee he'd believe me. I'd forgone a stop at the police station for the same reason. Babbling about demons living beneath the city would only get me tossed in a cell again – or worse – and I couldn't afford that. Not now.

"I was working on something with the police through the night." Innocuous enough, I hoped.

"And most of the day as well? We sent a messenger to your house this morning and there was no answer. He put a note in your mail slot. We held out until noontime, and then we couldn't wait any longer."

"Noontime?" I pulled out my watch, realizing as I did so that I'd not once checked the hour since I woke from my drug-induced stupor. I'd assumed it to be morning since I'd visited Old Innsmouth during the night.

When I saw it was almost four in the afternoon, I let out a gasp.

I'd lost nearly an entire day to my father's dastardly venom!

"I…I didn't check—"

"We need your help."

"We?" Had Flora changed her mind about me? I stepped past Ben and into the hall, not even bothering to doff my coat and hat. I'd only taken a few steps toward his guest room when a soft voice to my right stopped me in my tracks.

"Hello, Henry."

Callie stood at the entrance to the parlor with her hands folded, demure as ever in her long dress and smartly proper vest, as if she'd just come

from work. But rather than her usual delicate smile, she wore a look of consternation the likes of which I'd never seen on her.

No, not consternation. Fear. I glanced behind me, where Ben still remained by the door, wringing his hands. What I'd taken for enthusiasm at my arrival I now interpreted more correctly as anxiety.

Flora!

"Something's happened." I glanced between brother and sister, neither of whom met my eyes. "What is it?"

"That's why we tried to get hold of you. Her fever grew worse by the hour, and this morning she woke up speaking nonsense."

"What did the doctor say?" Surely they'd called him. I made for the guest room but Ben's next words brought me to a halt.

"She's not there."

"What?"

"The doctor came by last night. He prescribed more laudanum and cold baths for her fever. I called Callie to help me with, er, bathing. But this morning, when we tried to move her—"

"She cried out so," Callie said.

"She wasn't getting better," Ben continued. "The doctor said there was nothing more we could do."

Ben's words turned my blood to ice and I struggled to breathe. No, it couldn't be. She couldn't be—

"When you didn't show, we had to take her ourselves."

Take her? "Take her where?" I asked through numb lips.

"The hospital. We've just now returned, to fetch heavier jackets and see if you—"

"The hospital? How could you?" My father had always said hospitals were the last refuge of the dying, the place you went when you had no hope. What had Flora's physician been thinking? If only I'd been there to stop him, to care for her myself.

This was all Ben's fault. If he hadn't prevented me from seeing her….

"We had no choice. She—"

"You should have come for me."

"We did, dammit! And you weren't there."

Ben's exclamation jabbed me like a sharp knife and stopped whatever I'd been about to say. Tears ran down his cheeks and his eyes were as red as they'd been at Scott's funeral.

I couldn't fault him. They had come for me. They'd even left a message, which in my haste I'd failed to read. What more could they have done? Neither Ben nor Callie had any medical training; likely as not they'd never even been to a hospital, never seen the atrocious conditions….

But I had. More times than I preferred to remember.

I had to get Flora out of there before it was too late.

"We must go there. Now." I grabbed my hat and hurried for the door. Callie asked a question, something about what I'd been doing with Inspector Flannery, but I ignored it. All I could focus on was getting to Flora and removing her to safety. Ben and his sister could come with us or not. Let the whole damn town rot in hell. I no longer cared about anything.

Except saving the woman I loved.

★ ★ ★

The stench of sickness and death struck us before we even reached the steps to the hospital, a miasma of unwholesome smells that trebled as we approached the doors.

Row upon row of metal cots ran down both sides of the long room. Tall arches indicated hallways and staircases that led to the various floors and wings of the aged stone building. From what I could see, beds filled every corridor.

The cries and moans of the sick and dying assaulted my ears as powerfully as their odors attacked the nose. Men, women, children, all calling for help or wailing in pain, their laments echoing from wall to wall until they blended into a cacophony of woe.

I drew my handkerchief and dabbed my eyes, which wept from the pall of human disease and caustic cleaning agents that hung in the air. Ben coughed and gagged so violently I feared he might vomit. Callie had paled but she apparently possessed the stronger constitution so many women have, and didn't appear in danger of fainting.

Harried-looking nurses in starched white aprons moved from patient to patient, mopping fevered brows and administering laudanum and other medicines. Here and there, physicians garbed in dark suits and serious miens examined the sick and dying.

"Where did you leave Flora?" I asked, taking Ben by the arm. He winced and I eased my grip.

"I, I think…that way." He pointed to a corridor on our right.

"Are you sure?" I demanded. If we had to ask the administrator to locate her, it could take hours.

"I—"

"I'm sure." Callie stepped ahead of us. "I remember exactly where her bed is."

"Thank God someone has their wits about them."

Ben frowned but said nothing as we followed Callie down a hall populated by every diseased state one could imagine. I feared for my own health while we strode past the coughing, the bleeding, and, in more than a few instances, the already dead, and tried not to think about the pestilence we might be breathing in. I did my best to keep my gaze straight ahead so as not to linger on those who'd shat themselves or cast the contents of their stomachs onto their sheets, but in some cases it couldn't be avoided, much like the puddles of effluvia that randomly stained the floor.

Flora's bed lay near the very end of the hall, just before the doors that led to the next wing. By the time we reached her, Ben had his handkerchief over his face and even my stomach was out of sorts. Even so, I'd thought myself inured to the overall conditions of the place.

I was mistaken.

Flora lay in a tangle of bedsheets that did little to hide her emaciated form. Her complexion, always Irish-pale, now held a decidedly sallow cast. Sweat beaded on her brow and dampened her hair to the point where the normally luxuriant curls hung in limp ropes that called to mind a horse's tail after a long run. Her lips were bereft of color and dark smudges rested in the hollows below her eyes.

The bandage I'd so carefully wrapped less than two days before now bore a series of yellow and brownish stains.

A spoiled cheese and sour ale smell rose up hot and strong, overpowering everything else. An odor no healthy flesh would ever produce. Red streaks snaked out from under the bandage and down her arm, a map of the disease's path as it spread through her body.

As alarming as the sight of her was, that suppurating wound on her arm frightened me more than anything.

"Damn it to hell." Despite the efforts of the doctor and myself, some sort of germ had taken hold in her wound. I wondered if Ben had been lax in caring for it in my absence, but I quickly brushed that thought aside.

Knowing Ben, I doubted any lack of vigilance on his part. Between him and Callie, they'd have done everything they could for Flora.

They'd simply not been up to the task.

"How bad is it?" Ben asked.

I shook my head and knelt down. I began to unwrap the bandage. Flora moaned but her eyes remained closed. With each section I unwound, the stench of festering decay intensified.

Ben grabbed my shoulder and forced me to look up at him. "Will she be all right?"

"I don't know." Left unsaid was the very real possibility she could die. I think he saw it in my eyes. His lips tightened and he released his hold on me. I returned to my grisly work.

The wound was badly swollen, the edges so puffy and bruised I could hardly make out the stitches holding it closed. Oily yellow fluids leaked out from between the crusted lips, dripping with poison and decay. Bright red lines ran up and down her arm from nearly shoulder to wrist, as if scarlet paint filled her veins.

"Oh, my."

Callie's exclamation didn't come close to capturing how I felt. Flora's injury was even worse than I'd feared, and definitely not something I was prepared to deal with. Medicine had come far since the black days of the plague, but even modern antiseptics didn't always prove effective against the myriad of organisms that lurked in the air and soil. Once an infection reached the blood, it became a race against time to prevent the spread of disease throughout the body.

Staring at her injured arm, I feared we might already be losing that race. Still, despite misgivings that I'd not be of much help at this point, I needed to do something. Left untreated, the infection would continue its advance and we faced the very real possibility she could lose her arm.

Or worse.

"We need to clean this. Now. Doctor." I raised my voice to be heard above the general din. "We need a doctor here."

"I'll get someone."

"Tell him to bring carbolic acid and more laudanum."

Callie nodded and hurried off, no doubt relieved to get away from the oozing rot taking over Flora's arm. I tossed the filthy bandage to the floor. The man in the next cot moaned and coughed, adding to the unhealthy

vapors surrounding us. Ben cleared his throat but when I glanced at him he had his gaze firmly fixed on his feet, avoiding my eyes. He had questions for me, no doubt. Just as I had things to tell him. Yet there seemed to be a wall between us. The wrong moment, with our minds on Flora? Or had something changed in our friendship?

Perhaps both.

Maybe it really was time to move on, not just physically but in regards to who I kept in my life.

Before I could further contemplate that line of thought, Callie returned with an elderly woman whose once-white smock now resembled a butcher's apron, painted in blood and body fluids.

I stood up. "Where's the doctor?"

The nurse shook her head, which only came to my shoulder, and pushed me out of the way with a gnarled hand.

"Not coming anytime soon, you can bet your life on that. A few hours, if you're lucky. And it don't look to me like you've got the money to hurry one. Now, you want my help or not?"

"We have what you asked for." Callie held up a brown bottle with a faded label. In her other hand she clutched a vial of laudanum and a roll of bandages.

A quick glance down the corridor showed no physicians in sight. With no other recourse, I nodded.

"Smart man." The nurse wore an assortment of pins on the lapel of her dress, including one similar to the Miskatonic signet Callie wore. I wondered if she'd attended school there, or assisted at the medical college, as some nurses did. She pointed at Flora's arm. "Lift it up for me."

I followed her instructions. Flora groaned and one leg twitched.

"Hold it tight. She's likely to wake up. You, girl, be ready with the laudanum."

The nurse placed her hands around the wound and squeezed. Flora's eyes shot open and she let out an agonized scream. Her body shook and she tried to pull her arm away.

"Hold her now!"

Ben threw himself across her legs, pinning her to the bed. I gripped her tighter, by the wrist and biceps. Her muscles went rigid beneath my hands. The nurse palpated the wound further, pressing her fingers hard on either side. Flora screamed again.

Another squeeze, and then a gush of vile effluvia burst out. Foul-smelling pus sprayed our hands and clothes.

"Ah, that's it. Come now, you must have more for me," the nurse said through clenched teeth. More yellowish exudate erupted, showering my arms and face. Bitter, salty droplets caught me in mid-gasp. I gagged and spat, scraping my tongue along my teeth to rid my mouth of the poisonous ooze.

Flora's body arched up off the bed, as if caught in a grand mal seizure, and then went limp. Her eyes closed and her mouth hung open.

I looked at the arm I held. The flow of infected fluids had slowed to a trickle. The nurse pressed the edges of the wound once more. When nothing else oozed out, she let go with a satisfied sigh.

"There. That should help." She wiped her arm across her face. "Nasty shite, eh?"

Moving with quick, precise motions, she administered a few drops of laudanum to Flora's tongue and then washed the wound with carbolic acid before wrapping it in reasonably clean bandages.

"Change it every six hours." She handed me the bottle and the rest of the cloths.

"Can we take her out of here?" I motioned at the sick and dying people around us. If she wasn't well enough to travel, what would I do?

"Aye, sure you can. If you want her to die." The nurse glared at me through age-faded eyes that still sparkled with intelligence and more than a little contempt for anyone who might doubt her knowledge of medicine. "She needs to stay in bed and rest. Use the laudanum to keep her asleep. The girlie here can change her bedclothes, can't you, girlie?" She favored Callie with a narrow-eyed look and received a nod in return, which seemed to placate her.

"How long?" If it was just a day, I'd force myself to remain patient. Use the time to pack my things and Flora's. Arrange the sale of my house through a solicitor. Even two: that would still give us twelve hours to—

"That depends. Was she a strong girl before this happened?"

"The strongest," I said. The nurse glanced at Callie, who nodded.

"Then, a week, I'd venture. Maybe a dog's hair less."

Ben said something in response but I didn't hear it. My ears were filled with the echo of her words.

A week? No! Not with hell coming to Innsmouth three nights hence.

Hiding provided no answer. My father had already shown he could locate me with ease. Besides, where could one hide if the whole town was under siege? And I had no intention of departing Innsmouth and leaving Flora behind.

Only one course of action remained.

I would have to stop my father.

Fear gripped me in a cold fist and squeezed me until I thought my heart might stop and my innards burst out. Even contemplating another encounter with the demon in that cavern was something I'd never wished to do. Let alone launch an attack against it. A fool's mission, to be sure. One I might not survive, even if I convinced Flannery of the thing's existence and led a small army into the beast's lair.

Unless….

The beginnings of an idea took root. Born of desperation, possible only through a combination of luck and timing. But if it succeeded, I could rid Innsmouth of my father, the demon, and the dead things bearing their sinful offspring.

A spark of hope sprang to life within my terror-frozen heart. Twice I'd made a vow to be the hero Flora needed, only to see bravery crushed by circumstance and the greater power of my foe.

Now, however, my father's intelligence and supernatural allies might just give me the advantage I needed. He'd like as not be occupied the next forty-eight hours with amassing his troops and finalizing his plan of action. There'd be little time to spare worrying about me. Why should he? He already believed me no consequence. He might have one of his walking corpses watching me, but I could take care not to be seen or followed. To Silas, I – like all humans – was nothing more than a fly, a pest to be swatted if it got in the way.

Perhaps I could turn that arrogance, which he'd always possessed but now seemed magnified a hundredfold, into my best weapon against him. I would do the one thing he'd least expect.

Bring the war to him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Instead of heading directly to the police station, I returned to my house. I had nothing to offer Flannery except a wild tale, some bruises, and a letter that could have been written by anyone. Yes, he'd seen one of the monsters firsthand, and he knew about the book, but that did not guarantee he'd be ready to believe an army of demons was amassing beneath the city, led by my supposedly dead father.

I needed actual proof.

I'd also need a way to lead him to my father's lair. My recollection of my path through Old Innsmouth was hazy at best, and thanks to my father drugging me, I had no idea of the cavern's actual location.

Leaving Flora's side was one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do. Only after I received assurances from Ben and Callie that they'd remain with her night and day did I depart. When Ben demanded to know where I was going, I gave him a vague story about working with the police to find the Fish Street Strangler.

"Henry, wait." Callie stopped me by the doors to the hospital. "We must speak."

"Not now," I said. I had too much to do and very little time. I couldn't waste any of it talking.

"This is important," she insisted. "There are things I must tell you. Urgent things."

"When I return, I swear." I exited the hospital before she could object further. I presumed her intentions had less to do with wishing me luck and more to do with expressing her feelings, which I had no interest in pursuing. My refusal was perhaps a bit brusque, judging from her aggrieved expression, but I felt no guilt. My heart belonged to Flora and had no room for anyone else.

Entering my house, I noticed two things right away. The stagnant sea smell of demon beast still hung in the air, reminiscent of too many fish dinners cooked with the windows closed, and someone had been by while

I was out. A note, in a plain white envelope, sat on the floor beneath the mail slot.

My heart jumped at the sight of the paper square. As I'd already retrieved the previous day's mail, this had to be recent. Had my father returned with new threats? I stared at it for several seconds before working up the nerve to bend down and pick it up.

It was with some relief that I opened it and found only a short letter from Flannery, stating he'd come by to speak with me.

Then I read the rest.

That damned book of yours has been stolen again and Professor Gardiner murdered at his desk. As soon as you read this, come to the station straight away. I want you to look at the body.

Gardiner dead. I should have assumed such a dire occurrence when my father mentioned having the book in his possession again. Just like before, he'd used murder to get what he wanted. How many others had died while I lay unconscious?

How many more would die tonight, and the morrow?

I checked my watch. It was already close to eight o'clock. If Flannery wasn't still at the station, someone there could retrieve him quick enough.

After changing my jacket for a warmer coat, I gathered everything I'd need to plead my case – the letter from my father, the drawings I'd made of the parasitical creatures in the corpses – along with a magnifying glass and a small surgical kit. Then I pocketed my gun and spare bullets and set out for the police station, praying I could make the sergeant believe me.

The cold night air added to the chills running through me, brought on by the knowledge that I'd be risking life and soul going up against the devil lurking below our town. But I couldn't back down again.

Not when so many innocent lives hung in the balance.

Flannery sat behind his desk, half-hidden by a cloud of cigar smoke thicker than the fog blanketing the streets. When he saw me, he stood and grabbed his jacket from a nearby coatrack.

"Don't bother making yourself comfortable. We've got a body to visit."

"Where is it?" I asked, following him down a short hall to a back entrance. Outside, a patrol wagon sat waiting.

"Anderson!" Flannery's shout made me jump. A tow-headed young man – hardly more than a boy, really – peeked around from the other side of the cart.

"Right here, sir."

"Ice shop. Double-time it, or you'll be sleeping with your nag tonight."

"Yes, sir."

The driver took Flannery at his word and no sooner had we taken our seats than he had us speeding out into the street with a crack of his crop. The cab jerked and jolted with each turn, forcing me to hang on with both hands to avoid being tossed into Flannery's lap. The jarring ride made conversation impossible, and I had to wait until we reached the warehouse, some eight blocks from the station, before I could ask the question that had been weighing on me since I'd read Flannery's note.

"What happened to Professor Gardiner?"

"That's what I brought you here to determine." Flannery glared at me. Not his usual menacing scowl, more a furrowing of the brow and a slight narrowing of the eyes. I couldn't tell if it meant his hatred of me was lessening or if he was just too preoccupied to bother.

He turned away and unlocked the icehouse door, and I had a moment to wonder how he'd react when I told him everything I'd learned. Then a blast of winter air rushed past me, leaving my flesh chilled and my teeth chattering. I paused to turn my collar up and entered behind Flannery, who was already lighting a lantern.

The inside of the icehouse was almost as familiar to me as my own workplace. On more than one occasion it doubled as a storage area for the dead, when the late summer heat got to be too much for the small ice chambers in the morgue. We would set up examination areas at the back and perform whatever tasks we needed to during the evenings after business hours. With the one morgue still closed after the fire and the other too small to handle any extra bodies, the icehouse was the logical choice as a temporary replacement.

The cold intensified the deeper we moved into the building. Gigantic blocks, each the size of a hansom cab and stacked five high, formed faintly luminescent corridors filled with twisting vaporous spirits where arctic air mingled with warm, moist drafts from outside. Flannery's lantern did little to cast away the dark and I had the distinctly unpleasant sensation of being back in the abandoned warehouse where I'd so recently followed my father.

"He's over here." Flannery turned between two rows. The flickering glow created arcane figures in the opaque blocks as he passed between them. At the end of the row a shroud-covered form lay atop a wooden bench.

Two lanterns rested next to the body, which Flannery lit while I pulled the sheet down.

The mottled bruising around Professor Gardiner's neck jumped out at me even before Flannery finished his task. Rows of circular contusions ran from one side to the other. I didn't bother to turn his head; no doubt the welts continued all the way around.

I took one of the lanterns and placed it next to the professor's neck. A few seconds of close scrutiny easily confirmed the presence of pinprick wounds within each discoloration.

"He was murdered in the same way as the others," I said, stepping away from the body. Seeing Gardiner lying there, stiff and pale, was too much of a reminder that I stood a good chance of ending up in the same state if I didn't put an end to my father's hellish plot.

"By one of those…creatures." Flannery spit out the word as if he hated saying it. Given his conservative nature, he most likely did.

Creatures. The word triggered another thought. Had Silas infected the professor like the others? Was one of those hideous, tentacled beasts even now growing inside him?

It had taken the other bodies two nights to rise up; I took that to be due to the things inside them needing time to mature. Which meant Professor Gardiner could still be handled safely.

"Yes." I'd explain exactly what kind of creature after we did what needed to be done next. "We must burn the body. Right away."

I expected Flannery to argue. Instead, he cursed softly and nodded, his expression almost contemplative rather than the typical controlled rage I'd grown accustomed to.

"I've got some men outside. They'll take care of it. That is, unless you fancy doing the job yourself."

"No." I turned down the wick in my lamp and drew the cloth back over Gardiner's face. What I fancied was an end to all the death surrounding me. The irony of that didn't escape me and I let out a bitter laugh. Oh, to have back the days when the dead people I saw couldn't rise up again to torment me.

"These are bad times," Flannery said as we exited the building. He sounded as if he wanted to strike up a conversation – another first for him – but casual talk was the last thing on my mind. I climbed into the back of the wagon and took a deep breath. No sense putting off the inevitable.

"I have to tell you something. I was coming to see you even before I found your note. I've acquired some information that could be invaluable in putting an end to these murders. In fact, I know who's responsible."

"What?" Flannery bellowed so loudly our driver turned and peered through the window. "Bloody hell, Gilman, why didn't you say something? What's his name?"

I shook my head. "I can't tell you. Not yet. There's something I must show you first. At my house."

Strong hands grabbed me by the lapels. Flannery gave me a shake, banging my head into the back of the seat in the process.

"Tell me, or so help me God—"

"I'll tell you everything, I swear. But it won't make sense now. You need to see for yourself."

One of his hands slipped toward his baton and his eyes narrowed.

"The only thing I'll see is you on a slab next to your professor friend if you don't tell me everything right now."

I tensed, thinking he'd decided to beat the answers out of me. Then he let go of my jacket and leaned back, his face still tomato red and his chest heaving. After several moments, he banged on the window for Anderson's attention.

"Yes, sir."

"Change of plans." Flannery spat out my address, all the while keeping his dark eyes fixed on me. The fury behind that gaze let me know what my fate would be if he didn't believe me. Alone in my house, with no witnesses, I'd likely suffer a most unpleasant thrashing. My hand brushed against the pistol in my coat pocket and I prayed it wouldn't come to that. But if it did, I was determined not to let anything stand in my way of destroying the evil beneath our city.

Even if it meant killing an officer of the law.

Still, by the time the carriage came to a stop, I was tempted to just leap out and run for the hills. Sweat dampened my hands so badly I doubted I could even hold my gun if I had to.

Inside, I didn't bother removing my coat. He'd believe me or not; either way, I'd most likely be heading back out again in a hurry.

I turned on all the lamps in the room and motioned for Flannery to sit down.

"Forget the damned pleasantries, Gilman. Spit it out or face the consequences."

"Do you remember those bruises on the necks of the dead men?" I asked, pulling up my sleeve.

"How could I forget? No doubt made by some of those goddamned monsters. Fucking awful way to go, strangled like that."

"It's worse than you think." I held out my magnifying glass to him and pointed at the mottling on my arm. "Look closely."

"Are those…? How did you come by those marks?" His eyebrows went up when he recognized the signs of the beast upon me.

"Just look."

He did, peering through the glass. "What am I supposed to see?"

"In the center of each circle," I instructed him. "A dark spot. Do you see them?"

Flannery started to shake his head, then stopped. Looked again. "Yes. What about them?"

"They're injection sites. I first saw them on the victims when I examined their necks in the morgue. The same men who later came alive and attacked my friends and me that night. The night when you saw…."

"Those bloody things inside them."

I nodded. "The creature that does this, he doesn't just kill his victims. Within those tentacles, the suckers, there is something like a needle. It can inject a powerful drug to render someone unconscious. Or…it can do something much worse."

"Worse? You mean…." He put the glass down and regarded me with dawning realization rather than anger. "Are you trying to tell me that's how these things breed?"

"Like parasites, yes. They deposit eggs into their victims. At least, one of them does. I don't know about the others. But the master, he can do it."

"And you know this how?"

"I've seen firsthand what he's capable of. And there will be more of them. Many more. That's why I was coming to you tonight. We have to stop this before it's too late."

The suspicious look returned to Flannery's eyes.

"You keep saying *he*. Who in blazes is it?"

The time had come for me to tell him everything. I both dreaded and looked forward to it. I needed to unburden myself, release the poison inside me. But I still feared his reaction, even though he seemed inclined to believe in the existence of monsters.

Would he retain that belief when he received information far more unbelievable than what he'd seen with his own eyes, information so inconceivable it could make a person question the very teachings of God?

There really was no choice. Not if I had any hope of gaining his assistance in my upcoming war.

Wishing I had a whiskey to calm my nerves, I took a deep breath and began my story.

"The night I was attacked in the alley and found that book, something happened that I never told anyone…."

★ ★ ★

For several moments after he finished reading the note my father left me, Flannery remained silent, his eyes closed, his head still tilted down. As I'd recounted everything that happened over the past days, I'd moved to one of the chairs in the sitting room and he'd done the same. I still craved that whiskey, more so than before. My hands trembled in my lap and my throat was dry as a dusty shelf. I remained seated, though, awaiting Flannery's reaction, my nerves stretched to the breaking point. I remembered how he'd caught me unawares during his interrogation of me, changing from calm to violent in the space of a heartbeat.

Finally, he opened his eyes and set the papers down.

"Your father is alive. He found a demon beneath Innsmouth and it turned him into some sort of half-man, half-beast. And now he wants to take over the city using an army of the living dead. Is that what you want me to believe?"

The inspector's words hit me like a punch in the stomach. I sat back. So, this was how it would be. Henry Gilman, lunatic. Even after seeing the impossible with his own eyes, Flannery still couldn't—

"Bloody fucking hell. Silas Gilman. I was right all along."

"Er, what?" Had I heard him correctly? "You believe me, then?"

"My da used to say Innsmouth's not like other towns. He was a copper here in the old days, during the plague." Flannery eyed me in a queer way. His words didn't answer my question, and I waited for him to continue. He pursed his lips beneath his thick mustache, as if trying to decide what to say next.

"I was there when they arrested your father." The sergeant's voice took on a cold tone. "I saw what he did. A monster, he was, playing Frankenstein

with innocent lives. A real cold-hearted bastard too. Never expressed any remorse in court. If anyone could find a way to open the gates of hell and make a deal with a monster, it's Silas Gilman."

His abrupt change of topic confused me, but his acceptance of my story overwhelmed any questions I had. A feeling of intense relief came over me, draining the strength from my body and the air from my lungs. He believed me! Had it been anyone else sitting across from me, I might have leaped up from my chair and shouted with joy. Flannery's callous gaze kept me grounded, however. I inferred from it that he cared not one nickel about my gratitude, held no sympathy for my status as the biggest victim of all the dire atrocities carried out by my father.

"How do we find him? And more importantly, how do we kill him and stop his disease from spreading?"

His words made one thing perfectly clear: I was nothing more than a tool for Flannery, a weapon to be wielded against the forces of evil threatening his town. Which was fine with me. We wanted the same thing, he and I. For different reasons, to be sure. He wanted an end to the new plague threatening the town. I desired that as well, but even more than that my motives were based purely upon self-preservation. I'd never be safe, never be able to live my life with Flora, if my father remained alive.

"I can help with both of those," I said. "But we'll need maps of the city. Including Old Innsmouth. And fuel oil. Apparently fire nearly killed the beast once, long ago. This time we'll finish the job."

Flannery stood up. "Aye, fire, that's the ticket. And mayhap something more, to make sure the job is finished this time. We've got maps at the station. You show me where to go. I'll take care of the rest."

I rose as well. "On one condition. I want to be there. I want to see him die with my own eyes. It's the only way I can be sure."

He nodded. We didn't shake hands, didn't smile. We weren't comrades, nor would we ever be friends. But we'd become allies of a sort, joined by a bond of mutual hatred. How would things be between us after we accomplished our task? Would he share the victory with me or cast me aside and hog the glory?

I found I didn't care. I no longer craved status as a hero, a clearing of my name.

Because once my father was dead, I still intended to take Flora and get as far from Innsmouth as possible.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Time is running out.

I stared at the maps of Innsmouth and Old Innsmouth spread across the table and tried not to listen to that inner voice, the one that kept speaking to me in time with the ticking of the clock in Flannery's office.

Tick-tock-tick-tock-tick.

Time – is – runn – ing – out.

Except I couldn't stop it. Not time, not the voice. I'd been staring at the maps for hours, while Flannery paced back and forth and occasionally tried to jog my memory by asking me yet again which direction I'd been headed, how long I'd been walking.

I'd thought I'd remember enough of the details to pinpoint a block or two; narrowed down that much, it would be easy to find the building I'd entered.

However, no matter how hard I tried, I continued to draw a blank. My memory, usually so precise, had chosen the worst time to desert me. Once over the bridge, I couldn't even guess at which streets I'd taken, other than a fair certainty I hadn't been headed toward the ocean.

The maps were more than adequately detailed, including one that showed the major sewer openings. I'd used a ruler and pen to mark all the possible ingresses and egresses into Old Innsmouth and I'd connected them to all the locations where murders or disappearances had occurred. Then I'd drawn a circle around the area, using the intersection of all the lines as the center point.

Except that area turned out to be more than ten blocks in diameter. Far too large for the three dozen or so officers Flannery had assembled while I struggled with my task. As far as they knew, our plan was a simple one: find the lair, shoot anything that moved, and destroy everything with fire.

I knew it wouldn't be that easy, however. So did Flannery, although he didn't let on. He'd told his men we were after a gang of ruthless murderers who were hiding out in a cave where there also happened to be dangerous

sea creatures. To their credit, most of them didn't believe him, although none challenged him to his face. I caught more than a few murmuring to each other and making the sign of the cross. The officers who'd witnessed the events at the morgue had no doubt spread the word of what they'd seen, even though they'd been told not to. I hoped none of them decided to back out before we commenced our attack; already a fear of being outnumbered had taken hold inside me.

That my father continued to build his own ranks was evident from the reports the station had received over the past three days. Dozens of men who hadn't returned home from work, or never showed up for it. People missing from their beds. Children waking to find their parents gone.

After a particularly disturbing message from the hospital – ten bodies disappearing while awaiting transport to the morgue – Flannery came to a halt beside me, his face pale and his eyes haunted.

"Your bastard father is amassing an army." Left unsaid was whether I'd come any closer to locating the entry point we so desperately needed.

I shook my head. What could I say? My father was fulfilling his promise. Three nights of infecting innocent people with his foul seed. And us helpless to stop it, at least until daylight. We'd decided the best time to move against Silas would be at noon, when he and all his spawn would be gathered in the cavern, awaiting nightfall to begin their assault on Innsmouth. We had no idea when or where my father would begin his act of war. Our only chance of victory lay in trapping them in one place, destroying general and soldiers alike in a single fell swoop.

Flannery cursed and slammed his palm against the table. "We can't let it happen again. Think, damn you!"

This was his nervousness showing, the same way mine did through the tapping of my fingers against the table or the way my palms continued to sweat. Did the inspector's bowels threaten to let loose every time he thought about facing the demon in the cavern? Did his heart clench in terror from imagining he might end up as one of the walking dead?

For the first time in my dealings with Flannery, I wondered if perhaps his bluster and anger simply served as a cloak for his insecurities. Was that his secret to leadership? Turning his weaknesses into what people generally perceived as strengths?

That line of questioning led to another. Had he, in fact, ever faced a situation that truly tested his mettle? It was one thing to engage in

fisticuffs with some ruffian or scoundrel on the street, or risk a gunshot while breaking up a tavern brawl. Even murders in Innsmouth – before my father's serial actions – tended to be crimes of the moment or simple burglaries. In most instances, the perpetrator was either caught red-handed and captured without much struggle, or simply shot dead while trying to escape. There'd certainly never been a murder spree the likes of which we were currently experiencing, even without a supernatural cause.

The mayor and police chief had to be leaning hard on Flannery to put an end to the worst serial killer in history, far worse than someone like Thomas Piper up in Boston. Would he crack from the pressure before we even made it into the tunnels? Or worse, would he be unable to keep a level head when face-to-face with the beast from Hades lurking down there?

And how would his officers handle such a profane sight? My own reaction had been one of abject terror so intense I'd nearly gone mad. If that happened in the caverns and his men deserted, the rest of us would be sitting ducks.

Perhaps those same thoughts had taken hold inside the good inspector. Wondering if he could trust his men not to break ranks and run. If he could trust himself.

If he could trust me.

"Fucking hell. I should be out there, not pacing the dad-blamed floor like a virgin on her wedding night."

I opened my mouth to remind him we couldn't do a damned thing if we couldn't locate the beast's lair, and that's when the truth of his distress hit me. Yes, he might be a tad nervous, but it was his sense of duty more than anything that had his knickers twisted.

I'd never imagined Flannery, he of the short temper and heavy fists, actually possessing a conscience. That being an officer of the law was more than just a job to him.

He truly would rather have been out on the streets risking his life trying to stop another innocent from being killed than standing safe inside—

Out on the streets.

I dropped my pen as the answer to our problem appeared in my head. How could I have been so stupid?

"What is it?" Flannery's eagle eyes missed nothing, it seemed.

"We've been wasting our time." I pushed the papers aside. "I know how to find his lair."

"Spit it out, man." He moved as if to grab my shirt and then dropped his arm when I stepped back.

"You said it yourself. He's out there—" I waved my hand in the general direction of the exit, "with God knows how many of those dead men. Gathering more."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"But come daybreak, he'll return to his lair. And to do that, he'll either cross the river or use the sewer tunnels that run beneath the city."

"And?" Flannery's anger clouded his thinking; I'd expected him to see where I was heading.

"All you have to do is place your men throughout the riverfront and waterfront areas, to keep watch for my father or his ghouls. Then simply follow them."

Flannery's eyes went wide and his face grew even redder behind his beard. Had I said something wrong? I feared he might reach out and strangle me, and I prepared to dodge to the side. Then he did the one thing I didn't expect.

He burst into laughter.

Not a bellow or a guffaw, more of a bark. Were it anyone else I might mistake it for a sick cough. But it was indeed laughter, because Flannery actually smiled as he choked out that hoarse sound.

"Gilman, that's genius! You've earned your pay this night. Show me on the maps the most likely places a man might make such an escape from town without being seen."

Thanks to the hours I'd already spent studying the layout of the city, I was able to quickly pinpoint several sites I thought would be appropriate. Flannery added others, based on the locations of the disappearances and the murder scenes. All were in close proximity to either sewer openings or places where catch basins dumped into the Manuxet.

Teams of two were dispatched to each place and told to remain out of sight. If anyone or anything went underground, they were to follow at a discreet distance and then return with the directions. Each team would carry a map and pen to mark their way.

"Whatever you do, don't let them see or hear you," Flannery instructed his men. "We don't want them to know we're onto them."

I wondered if Flannery would warn the officers they were risking not just life and limb by entering those tunnels but their very souls. He didn't,

sending them off with only a last admonition to 'keep their blooming mouths shut'. He shot me a look as he said it, warning me to do the same. Perhaps it was wrong of him not to caution them about the perils they were about to face. Perhaps not. Danger came with the job. I understood that, just as I understood his reason for staying silent – you couldn't risk having someone turn yellow at a critical moment. I didn't envy him; if cops ended up dying tonight or tomorrow those deaths would be on his conscience.

After that, it was a matter of waiting. I remained at the desk, ostensibly continuing to work on my route into Old Innsmouth, in the hopes I might suddenly remember something. Flannery alternated between pacing and staring out the windows. Every so often a citizen would come in to report a missing person or the sighting of a mysterious figure. Flannery would take their statement, promise to investigate, and then add the location to the several dozen already noted on our map.

Slowly, I grew aware of a pattern – or rather, a series of them. One group of disappearances seemed confined to a ten-block area between the waterfront and the Federal Street Bridge near the center of town. Another was at the far end of town, near the hospital and the Place of Hawks Bridge. A third was well to the south, bordered by Elliot Street and Federal Street, and nowhere close to the river.

The more I stared at the map, the more the patterns didn't make sense. The neighborhoods along the river? Yes. Those areas had both bridges and underground streams within them. But how would my father or his creatures get all the way to southeast Innsmouth, with its fancy homes and lack of commercial buildings, without being noticed?

Finally, I called Flannery over.

"Look at this." I tapped each of the circles I'd made, indicating the clusters of disappearances. "It makes no logical sense."

After listening to my thoughts – or lack of them – on the patterns, the inspector scratched at his beard and scowled at the map, as if by sheer force of will he might get it to reveal its secrets.

"That's the road to Ipswich," he said eventually, pointing at Elliot Street. "And that's the way to Arkham." He shifted his finger to Federal Street.

"Yes." I unrolled another map. "Both lead south. They have that in common. But neither is close to the river."

My frustration got the better of me and I stabbed my pen down so hard the nib broke and ink blotted the paper. Cursing, I pulled out my handkerchief

and dabbed it away, blurring the lines of the grand neighborhoods Flannery and I had passed through on our way to Miskatonic University in Arkham just a few days—

Arkham.

I stopped, my hand in midair.

That was it! Arkham. On the banks of the Miskatonic River.

"Hand me a pen." I returned to my original map. Suddenly it dawned on me. The pattern. How could I have been such a fool not to see it before?

"What is it?"

"My father. Surely he's Satan himself, the father of lies. He tricked me. Not once, but twice."

"How so?"

I took the pen Flannery held out and drew a line connecting the three concentrations of incidents. One to the east of town central, one to the west, and one to the south.

"See? Three points of a triangle. And in the middle…" I circled the area, "…the center of town. He's been right under our damned feet the entire time."

The inspector's eyebrows rose. "Are you saying this cave you saw is directly below us?"

"Either that or close by. Most definitely on our side of the Manuxet."

I explained my line of reasoning. "He purposely led me across the Water Street Bridge that night, into Old Innsmouth. Not because he wanted me to follow him to his lair, but rather because he wanted to lead me away from it. He injected me with something in that basement, rendered me unconscious. And then used the sewer tunnels to bring me back to this side of the river."

"How can you be so sure?" Flannery was staring at the map again, turning it this way and that.

"The pattern. I couldn't understand it until I included Arkham. That's where he fell into the river when the asylum collapsed. And that's how he was able to travel to the university, kill Gardiner, and retrieve the book. All without being seen. There must be a fourth river, an underground one that connects the Manuxet and Ipswich rivers and then flows down to meet the Miskatonic near Arkham. I'll bet a dime it parallels the road from here to the university, or close to it."

It galled me to think we'd been standing over my father's hideaway

this entire time, had traveled above his underground waterway when we'd made our trip to Miskatonic University. Oh, how he must have been laughing at us!

"And where would that place this cave of yours?"

I thought about that. Closed my eyes, tried to remember everything I'd seen while down in that abhorrent pit. The river had been deep and wide. There'd been no sounds other than the flowing water, which could mean either vacant streets above or too much earth for noise to pass through. The smell of rotten fish and briny water clung to everything, a foul miasma formed from the demon and her ilk that made it hard to breathe.

Or had there been another source of that stench?

"Rivers tend to be salty near the coast, because of the tides."

"Of course they do." Flannery rolled his eyes. "Everyone knows that. You think he's under the waterfront? How? That area's so busy someone would have—"

I waved at him to be quiet. I needed to concentrate. I had the answer, right there at the tip of my tongue…

Salt water. River. Cavern.

Cave.

"Caves!" I shouted it. "That's the answer.

Pulling the map close, I ran my finger down the coastline, from Newburyport to Gloucester. "Caves. This whole area is riddled with them, where the sea has carved into the bedrock. But they're not deep. And you don't find them inland. But along the coast, where the Ipswich and Manuxet join and dump into the ocean…."

I drew a rough circle across a section of Innsmouth, enclosing a small area between Federal Street, the waterfront district, and the Manuxet River. Right in the middle of one of the patterns we'd previously mapped.

And near the center of that new circle?

I gasped when I realized what I was looking at.

My street.

Everything became so clear, even as my vision clouded over, obscured by a red rage. My father's uncanny ability to know my every move. The ease with which his dead soldiers found me at the pub. The attack at the morgue. All within two or three streets of each other.

He'd been toying with me the entire time! How long had he kept his eyes on me before our encounter in the fog? Days? Weeks?

Months?

"So that's where you've been," I whispered. "Now I know."

Something touched my shoulder and I jumped. Flannery's hand. For once, he wasn't looking at me with anger or hatred in his eyes. This time, I saw only compassion.

He'd understood the significance of that circle as well.

"Don't you worry, Gilman. We'll find him. And this time we'll send him and his monsters back to the fires of hell for good."

It should have been a distressing moment for me. A child planning patricide. Yet that's what we were doing and I harbored no guilt, no remorse. Not even when I answered Flannery.

"I want to be the one who does it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The sun was just brightening the horizon when we received the news we'd been waiting for.

One of Flannery's men, a thin, gray-haired veteran named Hanson, returned to the station reeking of stagnant water and human waste, his clothes soaked and his face coated in filth. He'd spotted a group of men entering a catch basin on Bank Street, right near the hospital.

"Followed 'em down, nice and quiet, just like you ordered, Inspector," Hanson said. "Goddamn water stinks of shit and dead fish. The tunnel led to a river, just like Mr. Gilman said it would. Wide as the Manuxet, it is. The footprints on the bank went east, toward the harbor."

"I knew it." I traced my finger along the map. Bank Street became Pain Street in the center of town, and then State Street in the warehouse district. And it ended right at Water Street and the wharfs.

"I'll bet other catch basins join with it as well. We've got our entry point, Inspector."

"All right, then." Flannery's voice took on the authoritative, rather pompous tone I was more familiar with. "Send the word out to the men to get some rest or food and be back here in three hours."

"Aye, and a change of clothes." Hanson exited, leaving Flannery and me alone once more.

"That goes for us too, Gilman," the inspector said. "A little shut-eye and a meal. Just what the doctor ordered."

We donned our coats and went outside, where the morning sun had started burning off the fog and people were beginning to fill the sidewalks, heading to work or market. Flannery tipped his hat to me and flagged down a hansom. As the taxi rolled away, it struck me that I had no idea where he lived. Based on his manner of dress and attitude, I envisioned a comfortable brownstone somewhere in the center of the city, not a man of wealth by any means but firmly middle class. Never any worries about paying his bills or putting food on the table.

The way my life had been before my mother's cancer and my bastard father's actions stole it all away.

I stood there at the corner for a moment, pinned in place by indecision. I didn't want to go home – if I went to bed now, I'd most likely sleep the entire day away. Should I ride across town to the hospital and check on Flora? It was still quite early, and she needed her sleep. Besides, that would leave no time to follow the second part of Flannery's advice. Fill my belly, which had begun a constant grumbling well before sunup.

An army fights better on a full stomach.

I'd heard that somewhere. And no mistake, we were going to war in a few hours. Sleep might be impossible, but food wasn't.

After checking my billfold, I decided to treat myself to a proper breakfast, something I hadn't done in…I couldn't remember how long. Unpredictable work hours and low finances usually had me making coffee and perhaps an egg at home, or picking up a small pastry on the way to work.

Considering it might be my last meal, I decided it ought to be a fine one.

I located a restaurant nearby and ordered a veritable feast: eggs fried in butter, toast and jam, a cup of porridge, sausages, and a fruit assortment. Accompanied by coffee, served with both cream and sugar. My repast cost me a full day's wages, but I enjoyed every mouthful while I perused the newspaper.

The headlines screamed about the rash of disappearances. On page two, the editor called upon the mayor and his council to do something or come election time they might see themselves on the breadlines. The rest of the paper held the typical news of the day, as if the city wasn't falling apart around us. The St. Louis Browns continued to win. A fire in Boston claimed the lives of thirty factory workers. The Yellow Kid's latest antics gave me a chuckle, despite the fact that I rarely read cartoons. By the time I finished both meal and paper, two hours had passed and I felt enervated and more than a little ill. Hardly what I'd call ready for battle.

To combat the lethargy brought on by lack of sleep and a full belly, I went for a walk, first down Waite Street and eventually over to South Street, with the idea of getting a look at the catch basin where we'd be making our entry in a short while.

I half expected to find Flannery there, doing whatever it is police officers do when preparing for a raid. But the place was empty except for

the carcass of a dead cat, its body bulging from decomposition and its fur missing in several places.

Seeing the rotting corpse engendered a strong turmoil in my lower belly. I doubled over and vomited my breakfast onto the cold sidewalk. A bout of violent retching followed, as my stomach attempted to purge every last drop of bile and acid. A pair of men in factory clothes cast knowing looks my way, no doubt taking me for some habitual drunk just coming home from an all-night bender. I certainly looked the part, with my eyes red and sunken from lack of sleep and my clothes disheveled from working all night.

I straightened with a groan. Every muscle from chest to hips felt tight to the point of snapping. The remains of my breakfast mocked me, money wasted, literally tossed away. My body wanted nothing more than to spend the next twelve hours on my mattress. My brain agreed, because sleep meant escaping my terror.

Go home. Bathe yourself.

A sensible idea. Some cold water and a change of clothing might perk me up. Except when I checked my watch, I discovered I needed to be back at the station in an hour. Not even enough time to walk to my house and back, let alone scrub the aches from my body and the vomit from my tongue.

Instead, I returned to the precinct house and washed myself as best I could in a tiny lavatory that stunk of old piss and man-sweat. I was toweling my face with some suspect linens when I heard Flannery call out for me.

"You look like hell," he said, as I entered his office. He, of course, looked quite the dandy with his fresh suit and hair shining with pomade.

"Let's just get on with it."

Flannery nodded, unperturbed by my grousing. "The men are assembling outside. Thirty of them, armed with pistols and plenty of ammunition. We've also got several gallons of kerosene. When we get down there, we stick to the plan. Shoot anything that moves and then set the place on fire."

"Make sure they know to aim for the head," I reminded him.

"Aye. They've been told. No quarter. Kill first and ask questions later."

"What about…the thing I saw? In the river." I couldn't bring myself to call it what my father had: *Mother.*

"Kerosene burns well enough on the water. We'll roast that abomination."

He motioned for me to follow him. I grabbed my coat and hat and we exited the station. Three paddy wagons and a carriage waited.

"Let's be off," Flannery shouted at the drivers. He climbed into the carriage with me close at his heels. It wasn't lost on me that in the space of a day and night I'd gone from pariah to the inspector's right-hand man, thanks to what I knew. A fine pair we were. Him using me and me using him in the same manner, as the means to a shared end. The death of my father and the beast controlling him.

Neither of us spoke during the ride, both lost in our own thoughts. I assumed his involved strategies for the coming battle, but what did I know? Behind that perpetual scowl he might just be cursing the very same sour stomach that currently afflicted me.

When we arrived at the catch basin, Flannery ordered two men to remove the lid with a pry bar while the rest of the officers checked their weapons, no doubt thinking the same thing as I: my father's henchmen had lifted that heavy lid with their bare hands. That spoke of immense strength. And soon we'd be going up against those same men.

Three pale-faced officers stood to one side, foreheads beaded with sweat. Flannery pointed at the packages they held.

"Explosives," he said. "Enough to bring down a building or two if need be. You're not the only one that knows how to take care of a demon."

I questioned him on that, but he shook his head and cautioned me to stand clear of the trio, advice I quickly heeded. I didn't envy the poor sods. One misstep with a match and we'd have a major disaster on our hands.

Not that we'd likely know, the end would happen so fast.

Two dozen men descended into the tunnel in pairs, with Hanson, the man who'd located the lair, and his partner in the lead. Flannery, myself, and six officers toting containers of kerosene brought up the rear. When it came time for us to climb down, the stench of human waste and rotting garbage nearly sent my guts into spasms again. Except for his face turning redder than usual, Flannery seemed unaffected by the detestable odors. He disappeared into the gloom and then it was my turn.

My legs and arms shook as I lowered myself into the hole. Visions of walking corpses waiting in the darkness filled my head. We'd prepared for the possibility of a trap, the very reason why Flannery had sent so many armed men down first. Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that my cursed father remained one step ahead of us, despite how carefully we'd planned.

The man had been a genius in life; God only knew what kind of animal cunning the demon's corruption had added to his powerful intellect.

Frigid sewer water soaked my shoes and cuffs, the icy burn diverting my attention away from my musings. Although the water was only a little more than ankle-deep, the bitter cold sent shivers through me. Flannery drew his electric torch and we moved forward, following the shadowy forms of the men ahead of us. A few muttered curses echoed off the stone walls, followed by shushing admonitions, which the gruesome surroundings rendered into reptilian hisses.

I drew my coat tighter and did my best to ignore thoughts of the foul waters corrupting my skin. Heaven only knew what kinds of diseases we were wading through. Dysentery, typhoid, leprosy, my mind provided. I promised myself a long, hot bath – maybe two – when this was all over. Damn the cost.

Of course, I'd need every penny in order to get myself and Flora out of Innsmouth when—

Wait!

My heart soared and I nearly laughed aloud as a sudden thought came to me.

The town council had offered a reward for anyone who helped the police capture the Fish Street Strangler. One hundred dollars. And here I was not only helping in the capture, it was my information and aid that had led the police to his very lair, had in fact identified him and his nefarious plan for them. I'd done everything except shoot him myself, and that might very well happen before the day ended.

If anyone deserved that reward, it was me. One hundred dollars was ten weeks' salary, more than enough to get us started somewhere like Boston or even Manhattan.

Not to mention the accolades to accompany it. Henry Gilman, the man who saved Innsmouth. My face in the newspapers. People would be lining up to offer me jobs.

Thank you, Father. Finally, your evil and arrogance have benefited me.

I increased my pace, my renewed vigor fueled by the desire to reap deserved rewards after so many years of toiling in despair.

"Any of this familiar?" Flannery whispered, mistaking my energy for recognition.

"No." I shook my head. I'd been unconscious during my trips in and

out of the demon's lair. It was possible I'd been carried through this very tunnel and I'd never know it.

Tension and darkness combined to disrupt any ability to determine the passage of time. We could have been in the tunnel for a quarter hour or twice that. I tried to think of how far it was from the hospital to Water Street. Two miles? Surely no more than three. The cavern couldn't lie any farther than that or it would be in the ocean.

Assuming we walked a straight line.

Sounds reflected off the curved stone walls and the surface of the water in weird fashion, adding to our disorientation. It became difficult to judge how near or far were the whispers of the men or the occasional splash as unseen rats and other vermin dropped into the water.

The miasma of rot and human waste served as a foul backdrop to our trek. Every so often an extra-fetid bubble would rise up from the unclean fluids and strike one unawares. My stomach alternately growled and threatened to erupt as hunger and dyspepsia warred within me.

Hushed voices reached us and a pair of officers emerged from the gloom ahead, their faces ruddy.

"We've reached the river, sir," one of them informed Flannery. "And there's something else."

"Spit it out, then," the inspector ordered.

"Tracks, sir. Lots of 'em. Footprints, and…." The man's voice trailed off. His partner swallowed and fidgeted with his jacket, but remained silent.

"Let me guess," I interjected, before Flannery lost his temper. "Larger than a man's foot, but oddly shaped. Like a frog of tremendous size."

"Aye." The man bobbed his head up and down, his relief at not being called out as crazy evident on his face.

"It's him," I said, looking directly at Flannery. "We're getting close."

"All right." Flannery pursed his lips before giving his next orders. "We go forward together. Keep watch front and back, in case this madman has guards posted."

"And to the sides," I warned, a subtle reminder to Flannery about the beast lurking in the river.

"Right. Let's get this done."

We resumed our sodden march. My entire body quivered with dreadful anticipation, much as a person feels when awaiting dire news, only a thousandfold worse. It crossed my mind that perhaps my sinful father

might have felt this same trepidation while he stood in that courtroom, hanging on the judge's words. Once again I cursed his loathsome decision, the effects of which still haunted me and the town so many years later.

If only he'd died in the explosion or subsequent fall.

Lost in my bitter ruminations, I didn't notice we'd exited the tunnel until I bumped into the man in front of me. He turned with a start, his pistol rising.

"Bloody arsehole, watch where you're going or you might eat a bullet next time," the officer spat, his eyes narrowed.

I nodded and stepped away, well aware of my good luck that he hadn't pulled the trigger. With my brain engaged again, I saw how the water we'd been slogging through flowed down a gentle slope and over the edge of a lip into what I presumed was the river below. The foul stream cut a swath through the wide, slightly damp soil of the riverbank I remembered all too well from my time in my father's cavern.

Treading carefully, I made my way to where Flannery stood by the edge, a good twenty feet above the deceptively calm water. He shone his torch down, as did several other men. In the yellowish light, the surface appeared as smooth as ice, nary a ripple to indicate it wasn't solid. Waves of chilly air, several degrees colder than the dank atmosphere of the tunnel, rose up from it.

"The tracks lead to the right," Flannery said, his eyes never leaving the water. I wondered if, like me, he was imagining the behemoth lurking somewhere in those stygian depths.

"As we guessed." In that direction lay the mouths of the Manuxet and the Ipswich, where the waters flowed into the bay. Like its cousins, this one, too, would have an opening there.

Flannery drew his pistol and motioned for the men to move out. None of them spoke and more than a few crossed themselves. Guilt added to the sour acids churning in my stomach. In twos and threes, the officers headed toward certain death, believing they were prepared for whatever lay ahead. Only Flannery and I knew the truth: many of those foolish, brave men wouldn't be returning. Even with all our weapons, we'd be hard put to take down my father's undead army, which these poor souls had heard described but only a few had actually encountered.

On top of that, we'd have my father and the abomination in the river to contend with as well. I'd seen with my own eyes that it responded to

his voice. Our only hope was that the injuries my father spoke of would slow it enough so we could set it ablaze and bring the roof down upon it before it killed us all.

The cavern brightened as several men lit oil lamps. The glow did little to dispel the perpetual night of the place and I worried we'd only make a target of ourselves to anyone awaiting our approach, but I understood the need for them now. A single misstep and a person could tumble over the cliff and be lost forever.

I found myself casting frequent glances toward the river, expecting at any moment to encounter that enormous eye staring back at me or have gigantic tentacles fall upon us like toppling trees. With each passing minute, my nerves, already taut as piano wire, tightened even further. My skin grew clammy and waves of hot and cold rushed through me, as if I suffered from an onset of ague. My hands trembled so badly I feared I might accidentally discharge my pistol.

Shadows cavorted around us, cast by the torches of the men. Their movement became a distraction, pulling my eyes from one direction to another. I was never sure if what I saw was merely a harmless flicker or something sinister sneaking up. The enormous expanse of the cavern amplified the slightest sounds, so that the harsh breathing of the men, the muffled grinding of soil beneath boot, and the stirrings of hidden creatures all took on menacing overtones.

Something splashed gently down in the river, a tiny sound that in other circumstances might have gone unnoticed. A fish breaking the surface, perhaps, or some blind, pale cave frog. Behind us, one of the men grunted. Another wet musical note, the tone of a rock dropped into a lake. Up ahead, several lights darted back and forth. Urgent whispers echoed back.

"What in blazes now?" Flannery muttered. He tapped the man in front of us. "William, go see what—"

The bearded officer disappeared before our eyes.

I turned toward the river, my heart already speeding up as my brain struggled to catch up to what I'd seen.

An impression of movement, a ghostly shape low to the ground, thick as a man's leg and moving like a snake.

Someone screamed and all hell broke loose.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Massive appendages rose over the edge of the embankment and whipped across the ground. Men cried out as the leviathan's tentacles wrapped around them and plucked them away faster than lightning.

"Shoot it!" Flannery shouted. Ignoring the danger, he ran to the cliff's edge and fired downward. Others followed suit. The explosions of pistols and rifles were deafening. A great thrashing erupted in the water, the surface churning as the behemoth writhed.

"Use the kerosene!" I called out. When nothing happened, I ran back to the men carrying the canisters. Two of them were gone, their wide-mouthed flasks on the path. A third fellow lay on the ground, clutching a bloody stump where his leg should have been. The other three stood frozen, mouths hanging open at the scene before them. I grabbed the containers from the path, pulled the stoppers, and threw them as far as I could, aiming for the center of the turbulence. Then I went to the paralyzed men and slapped the nearest one until life returned to his eyes.

"Burn it, you fool! Burn it to hell."

He stared at me and shook his head. Cursing, I pulled out my own matches and took the oversized flask from his hand. A massive appendage knocked one of the officers into the roiling water. Gnashing, circular mouths as large as dinner plates snapped at me as the alien member went by.

Praying that none of the deadly limbs found me, I heaved the open jug into the darkness. Wet liquid sprayed me and the pungent tang of kerosene assaulted my nose and burned my throat. I fumbled for my matches. The first two fell from my fingers when I tried to strike them. The thunder of gunfire and the wailing of injured men hammered my skull and made it hard to think. I shook out another match. This time it lit.

And so did the sleeve of my coat.

Yellow-orange flames enveloped my arm. I cried out and struggled to free myself from the burning jacket. Pain raced across my hand and then I

was free, holding the blazing cloth at arm's length while oily smoke brought tears to my eyes. Without thinking, I tossed the coat over the edge.

A tremendous roar filled the air, the stentorian bellow of a prehistoric beast. The ground trembled and a bright glow lit the cavern. A rain of sparks fell on us.

"More kerosene!" Flannery was suddenly next to me, pulling me along. He grabbed another jug of fuel and pushed it into my hands. Took two for himself. He ran to the embankment, me stumbling in his wake, dragged along as much by his sheer force of will as any desire to play hero.

We reached the edge and I saw what my actions had wrought. The space-demon thrashed about, its tentacles aflame. Islands of fire floated in the river, whirling around in the maelstrom created by the creature's frantic movements.

With total disregard for his own safety, Flannery strode to the very lip of the embankment, his eyes ablaze – reflection or his own internal hell, at that moment I couldn't say. He poured the contents of a container onto the flailing limbs of the beast. The flames expanded, heat and oily smoke rising to where we stood. He dumped the next container as well, and then took the one from my hands and did the same.

The struggling demon loosed another of its primordial cries and the deafening bellow shook me from my stupor. I turned and ran back to the officers who'd carried the kerosene and took the last two vessels from them. I handed one to Flannery and together we returned to the cliff. Fire covered a large swath of the river but still the monster raged, flame and bullets unequal to the task of driving it away.

"Goddamn you to hell!" Flannery shouted, his voice lost amid the thunder of gunfire and waters crashing against the canyon walls.

"Aim for the center," I said, putting action to words. Rather than pouring the contents over the edge, I unstoppered my container and hurled it right into the eye of the unnatural storm. Flannery did the same. The beast continued its frenzy and Flannery swore.

"Nothing! Damn your hide, we wasted the last two—"

A pillar of fire exploded up, sending us stumbling back from the precipice. Another unearthly howl rent the air, even louder than before, shaking the very ground beneath our feet. A plume of water came down on us and terror gripped my heart with razor-sharp talons as I imagined the creature rising to its full height, that evil eye towering overhead, massive jaws opening….

"It worked!" A heavy blow landed between my shoulders. I reached for my gun, belatedly realizing it was Flannery's hand that had struck me. He pointed at the river. I moved closer and saw that the beast had submerged, leaving behind agitated waters and long streams of flaming oil.

It worked. I wanted to shout for joy but instead I lapsed into a coughing fit as my lungs finally succumbed to the abuse of soot and smoke. The need for air left me light-headed and wheezing, my chest heaving as I struggled to draw in a breath. Even the foul, tainted air of the cavern was a relief after the acrid scorch of the smoke. The more I drew in, the stronger the pong of fish guts and tainted water grew.

Rotten fish. Recognition exploded in my addled brain. It wasn't just the cavern. It was—

Someone screamed and gunfire broke out again, this time to our rear.

"They're here," I gasped, clutching at Flannery's sleeve. "My father… his men…."

"Damnation." Flannery pulled free and raced off, shouting at his men. More gunfire sounded.

I forced my feet to move. The world tilted and then righted itself. I focused on the pattern of lights ahead. They doubled and trebled before returning to their true form. As my vision cleared, I made out dozens of dead men and women approaching us from the way we'd come, their countenances ghostly in the dim light.

Flannery gave the order to move deeper into the cavern and the men wasted no time complying. I followed, pausing now and then to loose a shot into the advancing horde. Others did the same. Gunfire took down one ghoul after another. But for every one that fell, another took its place.

The path widened and I recognized the location as the same one where I'd walked with my father and listened to his mad tales.

"This is the place!" I shouted at Flannery. He nodded and then swore as the men ahead of us came to an abrupt halt.

Several dozen of the dead waited for us, their fish-belly pale faces glowing in the light of our lanterns.

We'd been run into a trap.

Once again my father had outwitted us. Now we were surrounded, with death waiting on three sides and solid rock on the fourth. Flannery understood the predicament as well and gave the only order he could.

"Aim for their heads."

A volley of shots rang out. The men formed two lines, one facing back and the other forward. I joined them, positioning myself between two burly officers. The sallow faces of my father's undead army made for easy targets. Still, they continued to advance on us, sheer numbers outweighing any damage we did.

The abominable stench of rotten flesh grew to gut-twisting levels. I held my breath for as long as I could just to avoid the vile reek of the poisoned atmosphere within the cave. Even the polluted air of the hospital seemed summer-fresh by comparison. And with each monstrosity that went down, flesh ruptured and leaking ghastly fluids, the horrendous odors only grew worse.

Someone cried out nearby and I turned to find Flannery beating at a corpse-man with the barrel of his pistol. The thing gripped him with both hands while a mass of wormlike feelers swiped at his face and arms. I placed my pistol against the creature's head and pulled the trigger just as those pale appendages changed direction and tried to steal the gun from my hand. The dead man's cranium exploded, showering Flannery and me with putrid flesh and juices.

"Christ Almighty, that was close," Flannery said, while loading more rounds into his pistol. Circular red marks covered his face and wrists, each one the size of a two-cent coin. I prayed for his sake – and ours – he hadn't been injected with any soporifics. Or demon seed.

A figure lurched toward us, a woman with a missing eye and a tattered nightgown that exposed a massive wound in her chest where green tentacles wriggled. I emptied my pistol into the center of the writhing mass and she let out a keening wail. Flannery ended it with a bullet into her gaping eye socket.

I stepped back to load my gun. Several of our men were down and I saw that despite the guns and truncheons wielded by the officers we barely held our own. The ghoulish army threatened to overwhelm us at any moment, and I feared our chances of survival were diminishing rapidly. Human flesh simply wasn't up to the demands of fighting supernaturally imbued muscle.

A flash of movement caught my eye far back in the murk. A pale figure, head and shoulders taller than the rest of the combatants.

My father!

He was controlling them from a distance, using them as a shield to keep

himself safe. His shark-lipped mouth opened and closed, no doubt casting some demented spell or exhorting his fiendish army to sacrifice themselves and bring us all down.

I swore at the gods of fate that had led me to this place. Our only chance of making it out alive would be to kill him, but from this distance that would be next to impossible. And in order to get closer, someone would need to get past the demon spawn. Only there was no space on either side free of fighting. Monsters pressed closer front and back, and we had no way around them. The wall of the cavern blocked us to one side, and on the other the slightest misstep meant a plunge into the river, where the she-beast waited.

Thinking about encountering that hell-spawn again doused the last of my courage like so much cold water on embers. My legs went weak and I took several steps back from the fray.

Leave! my brain shouted at me, louder than the angry and injured cries of the men fighting for their lives. If trained officers can't defeat this army, what difference will your gun make? The idea tempted me greatly. Turn tail and run back the way we'd come, take my chances with the lesser numbers of monsters behind us. If I could get past them, then it'd be a simple matter to return home, pack a few belongings, get Flora, and leave this accursed town as I'd planned. No shame in abandoning a fight that couldn't be won.

The animated corpses were bad enough; deadly as they were, bullets or a crushing blow to the head would stop them. But to be torn asunder and devoured by a thing that shouldn't even exist, a thing invulnerable to bullets, which even fire and rock couldn't kill….

Fire. The word resonated in my head, bringing with it a memory of the night my friends and I had been attacked in the morgue. Fire had put an end to the possessed corpses as surely as bullets.

And hadn't my father described how fire had almost destroyed the demon? The same demon we'd driven back by setting the water aflame?

I looked at the oil lanterns several of the men carried. We had no kerosene left, but perhaps the fuel in the lamps themselves….

My feet were moving before I finished the thought, as if I, too, were possessed, my body under the control of an outside force. Much like the night I followed my father into Old Innsmouth, a foolhardy valor overtook me and I wrenched the nearest lamp away from an officer who looked

barely old enough to shave. He gave it up without a glance, his attention focused on beating away the clutching hands of a corpse with his baton. I leaned past him and smashed the lamp against the creature's back.

A burst of flame enveloped the monster and it let out an inarticulate howl. As the flames rose, I pushed the lich back with all my might. It stumbled into two others and they caught fire as well, their burial clothes igniting in a flash. Pink tentacles erupted from their mouths, snapping to and fro like dozens of fleshy whips while dead flesh melted around them.

The creatures fell to the ground and their evil comrades swerved to avoid the flames. Another officer swung his lamp into the horde and cleansing fire sprayed across several corpses.

Triumphant shouts filled the air as more men hurled their lanterns into the oncoming mass of bodies. Rivers of orange and yellow sprayed in all directions and the beastly cries of the burning dead drowned out the exultations of Flannery's troops. Some of the officers fashioned makeshift torches, wrapping strips of their own shirts around the barrels of their guns and lighting them off the burning oil. While the torchbearers drove the undead back, other men fired round after round.

Just like that, the tide turned in our favor. The men sensed it and put even more effort into their onslaught, striking the creatures with nightsticks and guns. As the fight devolved into a bizarre brawl, I took the opportunity to skirt around the edge of the throng and head for where I'd last seen my father. I caught a glimpse of a misshapen form ducking behind an outcropping of stone and I put on more speed. This time he wouldn't escape me; I'd give him a dose of his own medicine, my revenge for all ills he'd wrought upon me through his actions.

Wary of another trap, I had my gun at the ready as I circled the gigantic boulder. Empty space and a solid wall of stone greeted me and I scanned the ground for his tracks. They stopped a few feet from where I stood. I glanced around again, peering into the shadows for any sign of a hidden tunnel or alcove. Nothing.

And then a glutinous whisper reached me.

"I warned you, Henry."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Above me!

Too late, I comprehended his deception and looked up.

He clung to the rock, dark tentacles spreading out from beneath his folded wings, a mutant octopus with a man's body and a shark's face. I raised my pistol but one of those appendages struck my arm before I could pull the trigger. The gun sailed into the gloom. I cried out and clutched at my bruised limb.

He launched himself at me and we hit the ground with bruising force. His much heavier mass drove the air from my lungs. Muscular coils wrapped around my wrists and ankles, pinning me in place like an insect in a museum display. His knees pressed against my chest, preventing me from drawing in much-needed air. A high, keening sound filled my head, as if a thousand mosquitoes flew between my ears.

"You should have listened to me." My father's voice sounded far away. The glutinous tones carried no trace of compassion or humanity. "The Mother's time has come and she and I will bring forth a new age. You could have been part of it with us. Instead, you will suffer the same fate as the rest of humanity."

A sinuous shape rose up before me. The serpentine form swayed like some transmuted cobra. Sucker-mouths opened and closed, pointed teeth gnashing in anticipation. The darkness and the spots whirling in my vision made it impossible to see the needles in the center of those deadly orifices, but I knew they were there, waiting to inject his demon seed and turn me into one of his brainless slaves. I fought to move, to scream, but his attack had robbed me of my strength, my muscles weak as sodden paper, my throat useless without air to move.

A sense of déjà vu came over me. We'd come full circle to that night in the alley, only this time I was going to die, for I had no gun to drive him off with.

Cursed Fate, she's finally claiming what she'd been cheated out of the

last time. I closed my eyes and waited for the inevitable, the evil kiss of death my own father was about to bestow upon me. If only I'd ended his life that foggy night, I'd be home now, or better yet enjoying an ale with Flora and Ben. And poor Scott, who'd still be alive as well.

Time slowed and the world disappeared until there was nothing but the chorus of insects in my skull and the bass drumming of my heart. I wondered if I'd already been poisoned, the jab lost to my dulled senses. The ache in my chest blossomed into full-blown pain as my lungs conceded defeat.

Flora's face appeared among the rainbow-colored spots and I wept in my heart, my body frozen so that I couldn't even reach out to her, speak her name one last time.

A sensation of weightlessness came over me. Gone were the iron bands around my limbs, the tonnage upon my body. I floated, freed from my mortal constraints. This was it, then. I'd passed beyond the veil, my life stolen away. I'm sorry, Flora, I couldn't save—

My chest heaved and my eyes flew open. I gasped and sucked in air. A thunderous roar battered my ears and red fire filled my vision. My body reacted instinctively, not so much rolling away as curling into a ball like a frightened child.

"Take that, ye dead meat."

Flannery! I'd recognize his bellowing anywhere. Still fighting to breathe, I pushed myself farther away and saw him standing over me, a flaming torch in one hand and a mad grin beneath his mustache.

"Let's finish this bastard, then."

Flannery's strong hand gripped my arm and pulled me to my knees. Dizziness threatened to send me right back down. Only terror kept me from blacking out.

My father. Where is he?

I held on to my unexpected savior while the cavern did another carnival spin around me. Other hands joined the inspector's, helped me stand. Someone pressed cold metal against my chest.

My gun!

I clutched at it. Flannery nudged my shoulder, turning me toward the back of the alcove. My heart jumped and I barely stopped myself from pulling the trigger.

My father crouched on the ground, his membranous wings in tatters, his loathsome flesh blistered and smoking. Pain and fury filled his inhuman

eyes. Two of Flannery's men stood just out of reach of his abominable tentacles, which lashed back and forth, held at bay by the officers' torches.

The situation was immediately clear to me. Flannery and his men had driven my father off me with fire before he could dispense his fatal injection.

And now Flannery waited for me to deliver the killing shot. Just like I'd asked him.

I raised my gun. My father saw the movement and went still, his limbs – human and not – spread out like a deflated squid washed ashore.

"Henry," he said, his voice clotted with phlegm. "You don't have to do this. It's not too late. We can rule together. Father, son, and mother."

If there'd been any doubt in me as to whether I could pull the trigger, his last word dashed it.

"You killed my mother and ruined my life. Go to hell, you evil bastard."

My first shot took him square in the chest. He slammed back against the rock wall, tentacles writhing. I remembered the beasts in the morgue, feelers bursting from their midsections.

I fired three more bullets into him, right where that revolting creature nested within his body. After the third, he toppled over and went still.

The four of us stood there, eyeing the misshapen form. When it didn't move, I pocketed the gun – Killed you with your own pistol, how's that for justice? – and turned toward Flannery.

"We have to burn his body. And the cursed thing that started all this is still in the river somewhere."

Flannery stared at me a moment. He must have heard the cold, emotionless tones of my voice. I know I did. I'd thought I'd feel something after putting my father in his deserved grave. Relief, joy, even just a grim satisfaction. Instead, there was nothing. Just an empty space where all my hatred had once been stored.

"Right. Let's finish things and be gone from this damnable place. Me, I could use a good drink. Or three." Flannery squeezed my shoulder and then motioned at the waiting officers.

"I want those explosives set along the edge of the embankment and against this wall. We're going to seal this hellhole forever."

He took the torches from the two men who'd been guarding my father's corpse.

"We don't have any oil left but I think this'll do the trick." Flannery held up a battered metal flask and used his thumb to knock the cap back.

He took a swig and passed it to me. "One sip, and then the rest goes to him."

I nodded and gulped a mouthful of the fiery liquid. Brandy, which surprised me. I'd pegged Flannery for a whiskey man. I went to hand it back and he shook his head.

"You can do the honors. You earned it."

My eyebrows rose. That was twice now he'd deferred to me when it came down to disposing of my father. My long-held distrust of him left me wondering if he'd really changed his opinion of me or if he just didn't want to soil his own hands and soul with what, in the eyes of a court, could be construed as murder.

Still, my doubts didn't stop me from emptying the contents of the flask over the foul corpse at our feet. Flannery took the flask back, handed me a torch, and retreated a step.

I gave the body one last look, trying to find any guilt or regret inside me. I felt none; just gazing at the monstrous thing my father had allowed himself to become was more than enough to wipe out any pity that might have remained within my heart.

"Good riddance," I whispered, and dropped the torch onto him. Ethereal blue-orange flames flowed across the body. Half-man, half-beast, all evil. And now he'd be sent to the fires of hell that he deserved.

One of the tentacles convulsed.

I didn't even have enough time to shout a warning. Burning appendages lashed out and then I was flying through the air, my chest racked with pain and stars filling my vision. I landed on my side and heard a sound like kindling snapping. Voices cried out and then a terrible scream reverberated through the cave. Blurred figures tumbled past and a broken, twisted body in a blue uniform came to rest in front of me. Someone fired a gun.

Ignoring the stabbing knife in my ribs, I pushed myself up in time to see a flurry of black streak through the shadows toward the river. Flannery was on his knees shooting at the speeding target, but either he missed or his bullets – Like mine, damn my father! He's tricked us yet again! – had no effect. The dark form went over the edge, limbs spread like a spider's, evil incarnate brought to life once again. Water splashed.

Flannery turned and stared at me, his eyes wide. I knew he was thinking the same thoughts as I.

If he makes it out to sea….

We had only one chance to stop him. Seal the cavern. Bury him and his dark mother under tons of rock.

"The explosives! Now."

Flannery's men didn't even wait for him to repeat my order. They rushed forward and put flame to fuse. The moment the lines ignited in a shower of sparks the officers ran in the opposite direction. The remaining members of the squad joined them, heading back the way we'd come.

One of the fuses went out.

Flannery tugged at my shoulder. "Move it, man."

I pulled away. Would two bombs be enough? The great beast had already survived one colossal explosion, as had my father. Both of them seemed to have more lives than a damned cat.

Curse you to hell, Silas Gilman.

I grabbed a torch and dashed toward the bombs.

With every step, I expected the fuses to reach their inevitable conclusion and my life to end in an explosion of fire and fury. Yet somehow I reached the devices while there were still several inches of fuse untouched. I hefted the torch and touched it to the failed wick.

A line of flame burst to life and raced down the fuse, much faster than I anticipated. Acting on pure instinct, I picked the bomb up and threw it as far over the edge as I could.

Then I ran.

I'd only made it about a dozen yards when thunder shook the cavern, vibrating the floor so hard I fell to my hands and knees. Dust and mud rained down on me. I got to my feet and staggered forward, choking, blind and deaf, knowing I had only seconds before the other bombs exploded. Praying I didn't run over the edge of the cliff, I closed my eyes and kept moving.

If not for Flannery, I'd likely have run right past the side tunnel and died in that cursed place, but he grabbed me and pulled me into the opening as I passed. I opened my eyes and saw his mouth moving but I might as well have had cotton in my ears. No sounds reached me except ringing bells. He pushed me forward and we ran through the blackness.

I never heard the second explosion but I knew when it happened. This time the walls and floor didn't just shake; the entire world jumped and twisted around us. The ground disappeared and I fell at full speed

onto my chest and face. Rocks battered my back and legs and I half ran, half crawled forward, terrified the entire ceiling would collapse and crush me.

A different kind of noise reached me through my deafness, more felt than heard. An all-encompassing rumbling groan that came from all directions. The hail of rocks grew heavier and I urged my body to move faster. My eyes were useless in the ebon world through which I moved. With no sense of direction I ran with my hands out before me. Several times I struck walls at full speed, scraping skin and bruising flesh but never slowing in my race against certain death. I surely cried out in pain and terror but no sounds existed in that place, just the subterranean rhythm of collapsing earth.

I collided with hard stone and something snapped in my hand. Arrows of pain shot up my arms. My feet slipped and I fell sideways, frigid water and muck soaking through my clothes.

Water?

We'd reached the sewer tunnels! Hope blossomed in my heart and gave me the energy to pull myself up and keep moving. I only went a few dozen steps before encountering another obstacle, but this time I struck relatively soft human bodies rather than unyielding rock. With a start, I realized I could see the shadowy forms of officers gathered around something. Their mouths moved but I remained deaf.

Bright light burned my eyes and I ducked my head. The bodies around me surged forward, pushing and shoving in a desperate attempt to move. My worst fear realized – we'd run into a dead end!

Peering through my fingers, I made out men suspended in midair. It took my brain a moment to comprehend what I was seeing.

They were climbing.

The ladder!

I threw myself forward but the men were pressed together too tightly for me to make any headway. The ground still trembled and boomed as thousands of tons of rock shattered and fell, providing plenty of impetus for people to climb fast.

A chunk of stone caught my shoulder a glancing blow and sent me reeling into the men ahead of me. No one paid me any heed.

Then a space opened and hands pushed me to the fore. My chest hit rough metal and I clutched at it, gripping the rusted bars. I climbed,

clinging tightly as my feet slipped and caught purchase again. Up, up. My head struck the feet of the person above me but I didn't stop. I had to be out of there!

Someone gripped the back of my coat and pulled me over the lip and I was free! I stumbled to my hands and knees and crawled away from the opening, crawled through a forest of legs until I reached open space. I rolled over onto my back and gazed upon the night sky. Never had Innsmouth's fog been such a welcome sight.

We did it. We defeated the beast!

With that, my eyes closed and oblivion claimed me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I woke on my own bed. There was an awful moment of déjà vu where I felt sure my father had just carried me back from his lair, only this time he'd planted one of his demon eggs in my belly.

Then the events of the previous evening returned in all their horrific glory.

But we did it! We put an end to him. To both of them.

Those words eased my soul as I forced my stiff, aching muscles to move. Every piece of me felt bruised and battered. It had taken Flannery and another man to help me into a carriage after they revived me with smelling salts. From there we'd gone to the stationhouse, where a surgeon attended to the wounded, including me. A dislocated finger and at least two cracked ribs, but I'd been lucky compared to the ones who never made it back.

Once I'd been wrapped and bandaged, Flannery had two officers escort me to my house, where they managed to keep me on my feet long enough to get me inside and onto the nearest couch. How I got from there up the stairs to my bedroom I couldn't remember. I hadn't even removed my shoes before collapsing onto my bed.

Now I made my way to the bath, where I stripped off my clothes, which stunk to high heaven of decayed flesh and despicable fluids, and tossed them into a corner to be disposed of later.

After scrubbing myself with soap and cold water, I took a closer examination of my injuries. Several cuts on my arms, hands, and forehead. A good dozen welts. A fair-sized bruise around one eye. Thankfully, nothing that would require stitches. All in all, I looked like I'd gone ten rounds with a boxing champion.

A second washing removed most of the offal stench from my body and hair. I considered heading into town to treat myself to a public bath, but my strength was already waning and the ache in my ribs rapidly advancing to real pain. I decided that the best cure would be to spend the day in bed, so I slipped into a nightshirt, stripped the befouled sheets off the mattress, and lay down again.

At some point, the sound of hammering interrupted my dreams and roused me enough to sit up. The pounding continued, resolved itself as someone knocking on my front door. I went to the window, my ribs barking in protest. In the murky light of dusk – or perhaps dawn, I'd lost all sense of time – I spied a familiar figure on my stoop. Callie Olmstead. Fearful that she bore bad news about Flora, I was about to open the window and call out to her when she slipped something into the mail slot and walked away.

My concern eased. Had it been anything serious, she would have continued knocking. Remembering her attempts at engaging me in private conversation, I guessed her note would be more of the same. Most likely something to do with her feelings for me.

Certainly nothing urgent.

I fell back into bed and closed my eyes.

★ ★ ★

When next I woke, bright sun shone and my pains had subsided to mere throbbing. I took another wash and doused myself liberally with cologne to hide any remaining traces of demon stink. Then I dressed, attended to my hair, and headed downstairs, where I finally remembered to check the time. Half past eleven; I'd spent a good thirty-something hours practically in a coma. My stomach growled for attention and as much as I'd have preferred to numb my aches with some willow extract and brandy, I knew that I'd have to eat something first or suffer a repeat of my previous purging. Also, I needed to keep a clear head, as at some point I'd need to visit Flannery at the stationhouse to discuss my due reward.

A stack of mail blocked the door but I pushed it aside with my foot as I left. Bills and solicitations were all I ever received; both could wait until I had some food in my belly. After that I'd check on Flora, when I had enough strength to be sure I wouldn't pass out right on top of her.

Sunshine greeted me, so bright it hurt the eyes and prickled the skin. I paused and tilted my face up to it, delighting in the warmth and the clean, fresh air that accompanied it. So unusual for Innsmouth at this time of year. At any time of year, really. A part of me felt like it could be my own doing. Perhaps the permanent miasma of fog and despair that blanketed the city was due as much to the demon that had resided below our streets all these

ages as it was to our geographic placement. By disposing of the creature had we also freed Innsmouth from its aura of contamination? I no longer considered anything impossible.

A fresh start, not only for Flora and me, but for the whole town. It served to reinforce my recent decision that I should stay and enjoy the benefits of my heroic deeds rather than begin anew somewhere else.

An hour later, with a meat pie and two cups of coffee – with cream and sugar, even though it cost an extra cent– filling the empty space inside me, I made my way to Ben's place. I still walked like an old man in the winter but my legs no longer threatened to collapse under me. It took me much longer than normal to cover the five blocks to Ben's, but I put the time to good use, going over in my head what I'd say to my old friend. A lot depended on Flora's condition. If she showed signs of being on the mend, I'd push to have her taken back to her own home, where Ben and I would share the duties of ministering to her. If she was no better, or, God forbid, worse, I'd insist on moving her to a private care facility. Cost no longer worried me. There'd be a reward coming my way, and Flannery owed me a huge debt. I had no qualms about calling in a favor if it came to that.

My only real worry was that Flora might still be averse to seeing me. I'd of course explain to her and Ben that the danger was over, that I – the hero of Innsmouth – had put an end to the Fish Street Strangler, the demon of the waterfront. I had obtained vengeance for Scott's death and Flora's own injuries, had brought about justice for us all.

But in her fragile state, would that be enough? Or had Ben already thoroughly corrupted her thoughts, using subtle means to turn her against me?

If that was the case, Ben Olmstead had a fearful reckoning of his own coming. I'd changed over the past few days. I wasn't the same man who'd walked away from his door, tail between my legs. Since then, I'd faced off against a demon from the depths of hell, a monster from beyond our very plane of existence.

And defeated it.

After you go through something like that, the idea of taking a punch or two from a mortal man doesn't hold much power to frighten.

Let him try and stop me, I thought. I'll fix his wagon. I fingered my father's gun, which I'd slipped into my coat pocket out of habit. If my fists couldn't do the trick, I was prepared for anything.

When the door opened in response to my knocking, a red-eyed Callie Olmstead stood there, a black shawl draped over a black dress.

"Henry. You came. We…we weren't sure…." Callie's voice faded off and she dabbed away tears with a handkerchief. "Come in. I'll let Ben know."

Fear gripped my innards and rooted my feet in place. "What happened? Is it Flora? Tell me."

She shook her head and put her arms around me, her head nestled against my shoulder. Pushing roughly past her, I stormed into the sitting room, shouting Ben's name. If he'd let Flora's condition decline to the point where Callie feared for her life, I'd kill him with my bare hands.

The parlor was empty and dark, the drapes partially closed and no lamps lit. A bottle of brandy and two glasses sat on the server. The air had a musty smell, as if no one had occupied the room for several days.

Wood creaked and shuffling footsteps caused me to turn just in time to see Ben coming down the hall. In the dim light, he appeared as a ghostly figure and my heart leaped in my chest when for a moment I could have sworn one of my father's minions had come for me.

Dark hollows sat beneath his eyes and his hair was tousled and wild, as if he'd spent all night at the pub. His white shirt lay untucked over black pants and an undone tie hung around his neck.

"Now you come." His voice held none of its usual authority and his breath reeked of alcohol. Shaking his head, he went to the bottle and poured himself a glass.

"What's happened?" I practically shouted, my fear getting the best of me. Something awful, for sure. Had the infection on her arm grown so bad they'd had to take the limb?

"We tried to find you," Callie said from the doorway. "We left messages at your house. Even went to the police."

"Messages?" I glanced at Callie, recalling her appearance at my door, and then returned my attention to Ben. "Dammit, man, tell me."

"She's dead." Ben downed his brandy and poured another. "In the early hours of the morning. She died in that awful place and you were nowhere to be found."

She's dead. Ben's words echoed in my brain, drowning out all other sounds. Dead. I tried to grasp the reality of it. My beloved Flora, no longer alive? Her vibrant smile, her exuberant charm, gone forever?

No, it wasn't possible. They were lying. It was all part of an elaborate plan on Ben's part to steal her from me. She couldn't be dead. Not Flora.

"You lie." I stepped forward, anger rising up inside me. "It's only been two days. She was just feverish. If you think you can keep me from her—"

Ben shook his head and raised his glass to his lips. I slapped it away and liquor sprayed us both. He stared at his hand with vacant eyes and then took the other glass and filled it. Tears ran down his cheeks as he spoke.

"It's no lie. God, if only it was. I held her hand as she passed. Whispered for her not to leave me. But she did. And do you know what the worst part was?" He gulped his drink and then pointed the empty glass at me.

"Her last words. Her last goddamned words. She asked for you. For you!" Ben's voice grew loud. Droplets of brandy sprayed from his lips and burned my face. Before I could respond, he jabbed my chest with the glass.

"Henry? Where's my Henry?" He mimicked a woman's tones, the glass striking my chest with every syllable. "I want to speak to Henry."

"It's true," Callie said. "She called for you. She wasn't angry anymore."

"Henry damned Gilman." Now Ben was drinking straight from the bottle. Tears ran down his cheeks. "While you gallivanted around, I fought to save her life. But all she cared about was you, Mr. Nowhere-to-be-Found."

"Shut yer damn saucebox." I pushed him away.

"Ironic, ain't it." He waved his hands, spilling more brandy. "You all besotted with her, and she goes and dies wondering why you weren't with her."

"Shut up." My fist lashed out of its own accord, fueled by fury and shame. The blow struck Ben in the nose and he stumbled back. His feet caught on a chair leg and he fell over, landing hard on his bottom. The bottle rolled away, trailing brandy across the carpet.

"Stop it!" Callie shouted. I caught myself as I was about to kick him, my foot already poised. He looked up at me, blood running from his nose and staining his ginger mustache dark red. The sight of it brought back unwanted memories of the ghastly fluids leaking from my father's corpse soldiers.

All at once, my anger faded, leaving only guilt and sorrow in its wake.

Flora was dead, and I hadn't been there to comfort her.

I turned away and found Callie blocking my exit.

"Where are you going now? There are important things I need to discuss with you."

"Where is she?" I asked, sidestepping her and her damned selfish attitude. How could she even think of discussing her feelings at a time like this?

"The icehouse." She reached out with a hand that I brusquely batted away. I didn't want her comfort. I needed to see Flora one last time.

Ben's voice followed me down the hall.

"It was always you, Henry. Damn your black soul to hell, it was always you she wanted and you killed her. You killed her!"

I slammed the door on his cries but his words clung to me all the way across town.

"You killed her!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Flora lay on a slab of ice, her flesh badly mottled and her body so withered that I nearly passed her by in my desperate attempt to locate her among the maze of blocks within the murky confines of the building.

Even when I recognized her, I had trouble believing the misshapen, discolored body was hers.

She lay on a slab of ice, between a young boy with a dented skull and an elderly woman dressed in the rags of a beggar. Her face was twisted, as if she'd died in terrible pain. The wound on her arm looked dreadful, black lines snaking up and down the withered limb from a ragged gaping hole where swollen skin had split away from the stitches. Had I not known better, I'd have taken her for the victim of a beating.

Upon seeing her, I fell to my knees and bawled like a new widower.

In a way, that's just what I was.

The love of my life had been taken from me forever. I held her cold, clammy hand and cried unashamedly for all that I'd lost. My guilt became a living thing inside me, a crazed beast twisting and kicking to escape its cage.

We should have been preparing to live our lives together. I would have asked her to wed, and she'd have said yes. Perhaps not right away, but eventually she'd have come around. Ben Olmstead was nothing but a pretentious cad, a womanizer. I was the man who'd not only always held her in my heart, I'd risked my life for her and the town, descended into hell to fight a demon.

And with my newfound status as a hero, I'd practically have the keys to the city. What better husband material could there be?

She'd have seen the logic in that and gladly accepted my proposal, and together we'd have lived long and happy lives, me a doctor and she my lady of the house.

Only now she was dead and the blame lay squarely on my shoulders.

Had I only taken a different route on that cursed night instead of walking down that alley, I'd have never come into possession of the damned book.

If I'd only been faster with my gun in the bar, Scott would be alive and Flora never placed in harm's way. If I'd remained at her side instead of going off to play the hero, perhaps I might have provided the proper care she needed.

If, if, if!

If wishes were fishes, no man would go hungry.

One of my father's sayings. Even now, in the throes of my heartache, he haunted me.

"Damn your black soul to hell, you bastard. This is as much your fault as mine," I whispered to the empty room, but it was my own mind that answered.

It's not your fault at all. He was the one who set all this in motion. His was the plan to bring hell to Innsmouth. He was the one who aligned himself with evil for the sake of immortal—

I lifted my head, which I'd unknowingly rested against Flora's frozen deathbed.

Immortality.

My father had achieved it, or at least a semblance of it. He'd brought the dead to life. Had himself been brought back from the edge of death and made whole.

I looked at Flora's contorted face.

Was it possible?

A desperate excitement rushed through me and I forced it aside, focused my concentration on piecing together the few facts I had.

The beast had brought my father back to life, yes. But it had also turned him into a demon. And his injections had allowed the dead to rise, but as creatures made in his own image.

None of that would be acceptable. I wanted to bring back Flora as a human, not a tentacled monster.

There had to be a way!

The book of spells was no doubt gone, reduced to ashes or at the bottom of the river. Even if I found it, by the time I located someone capable of translating the proper incantation Flora's body would have decomposed beyond saving.

Your father didn't have any spells when the beast saved him.

Truth. He'd said as much. I struggled to remember that conversation. I'd been in a state of shock at the time, my attention more on remaining

alive than his tale of survival. The memories were there but confused, like the contents of a puzzle emptied onto a table.

Something about the creature passing her essence to him, and then placing her egg inside him….

I have become such a thing, Henry. No longer mortal. Her blood gave me life and her seed made me what you saw tonight.

Yes! That was it!

Her blood, her fluids, had healed him. And only then had she stolen his humanity by making him the host to her parasitic fetus. And he, in turn, had passed both life-giving elixir and foul space-seed on to the corpses he revived, the innocents he killed. No doubt the blood acted as a medium that allowed the egg to grow, and the brainless state of those creatures was due to him being only partly demon. The secret lay in obtaining fluids directly from the source.

If I could do that….

I'd have to hurry. Flora's body was only a few hours dead, and still well preserved by the ice it rested on. If I had any chance at all to revive her, it had to be now.

The distance between the icehouse and my own residence was a good eight blocks. I ran the whole way, desperation lending new strength to my exhausted muscles. I gathered everything I thought I might need: syringes, tubing, a collection bottle, and a scalpel. Then I hurried to the morgue, praying that Fudge still resided in her small stable next to the building and the transport cart hadn't suffered any damage from the fire.

For once, luck was with me. Neither horse nor cart had been moved to another location or nicked by some thief. I hitched Fudge and headed back to the icehouse, promising myself I'd never complain about the quality of my transportation again.

I wrapped Flora in some old burlap I found. When I hefted her onto my shoulder, she weighed next to nothing, her illness having wasted her away in alarming fashion.

Lady Luck continued to favor me, as I encountered no one when I left the building and loaded Flora into the cart. The trip to the other side of town worried me only slightly. My status with the morgue imbued me with a kind of immunity; no one would think twice about seeing me driving a corpse in my trusty cart. As long as I didn't encounter Flannery or any of his men, who might wonder at seeing me about so soon, I would be fine.

Making my way through alleys and side streets with as much haste as possible, it only took me at most twenty minutes to reach the sewer entrance we'd used less than two days prior.

Now came the most dangerous part. If anyone happened along while I was entering the drain with a corpse across my shoulders, they'd certainly call out the alarm.

After checking to make sure no one was in sight, I slid Flora from the cart and set her down just long enough to heave the metal plate to the side. There was nothing I could do about leaving horse and cart on the street. In time, Fudge would get tired of waiting and find her way home, hopefully before someone reported her presence. If Flannery or any of the officers who'd participated in our demon hunt heard about the morgue cart being near the sewer entrance, they'd double-time it there to investigate. Another reason to hurry.

Climbing down the metal rungs with a body over my shoulder was a precarious business, one that had me moaning in pain with every step, thanks to my abused muscles. Even her diminished weight threatened to overbalance me and send us both tumbling down. But aside from barking my elbows and knees a few times I made it to the bottom relatively unscathed.

It only took a few steps for me to leave the cone of light from the drain opening and enter a world of pure dark. I cursed myself for not thinking to take a lantern along with my other supplies. Although I'd recently passed through the very same tunnel not once but twice, I quickly grew disoriented by my blindness. Moving in a straight line became an impossible task and I bumped into one wall or the other with increasing frequency, like a drunk in a narrow alley. In the end, I had to walk with one arm outstretched and my hand against the tunnel wall at all times in order to keep my vertigo at bay.

I arrived at the opening to the underground river with my arms scraped and my back on fire. I couldn't pause to rest, though. Every minute wasted meant less of a chance to revive Flora. I could not – would not – fail her again. I had to make haste, knowing it might take hours, perhaps all day and night, to locate the beast and extract what I needed.

That, of course, led to unwanted thoughts about what I'd find in my father's lair. I had no assurance the creature was dead; entering those unexplored waters might very well lead to me being consumed rather than bringing Flora back to life.

Try as I might, I couldn't push away my fears while I followed the path along the river, once again using the cavern wall as a guide. Without lights there was no way of knowing what lurked around me. For all I knew there might be a ravenous tentacle hovering inches from my neck, or a bloodthirsty corpse reaching for me. I tried my best to listen for any sounds, but all I heard were the whispered gurglings of the river and my own labored breathing.

Just like my last time in that awful place, time lost all meaning. I shuffled forward, wary of obstacles or attack. Despite how long I'd been without light, my eyes remained useless to me.

At one point, my foot struck a large rock, wide enough to force me to go around it. Up until then, I'd encountered only smaller stones. I took the change in terrain to mean I'd gotten close to the main cavern, where the blasts had collapsed walls and ceiling.

Then I paused as a sudden thought sent icy fingers down my back.

I hadn't stumbled over a single body.

During our fight, we'd put down dozens of reanimated corpses. And lost several of our own men in the process. When we'd left, racing for our lives to escape before the bombs detonated, the trail had been littered with bodies.

Where were they?

Only one explanation. Something had survived. Most likely the beast. And I was walking straight into its parlor.

You have to keep going. Indeed, I had no choice. Not even imminent death could stop me. Flora's life depended on me, and this time I wouldn't let her down. Either we both lived or we both died.

I started forward again and soon the trail became crowded with not just stones but boulders. Moving around and between them confused my sense of direction even further and I worried I'd walk right off the edge and into the river. My foot struck something and I heard the clink of metal on stone. A metal tube. One of the electric torches the police had carried. I set Flora down, my shoulders crying in relief as their burden eased, and picked up the torch.

I nearly cried out with joy when I pressed the switch and a steady beam of light came on. Dim and yellow, but more than adequate for my needs. I moved Flora to the base of a massive boulder and worked my way toward the riverbank.

Now I could see the damage we'd wrought. A few dozen yards from where I stood, the entire cavern had collapsed, blocking the way completely and creating a dam of sorts in the river, which had backed up and widened. I conjectured that some sort of flow still remained through gaps in the stones because the waters had only risen a dozen feet or so, not all the way to the cliff's edge.

I cast the light across the surface. Somewhere below waited the monster from beyond the stars. Dead? Injured? Or just biding its time? My life, my very soul, depended on it not being the latter.

My heart beat wildly within my chest at the thought of entering those stygian depths. I would be blind and defenseless, without even gun or flame to protect me. Descending through the frigid waters, while that great eye watched me approaching, its tentacles poised to strike….

A movement caught my attention and I aimed the torch at it. Ripples on the surface, something moving…a dark shape broke the plane, curved. Then another. Gliding toward the shoreline.

Toward me.

I stepped back several feet, keeping the light trained on it. My hand shook as if stricken with palsy. The sinuous form grew longer, a miniature sea serpent slipping through the water. It rose like a cobra from a fakir's basket, higher, higher, right to the edge, revealing itself as one of the mother-beast's loathsome tentacles.

It lived!

I backed farther away, remembering how the creature had plucked away Flannery's men as easy as a child picking berries.

And how the dead had been missing from the path.

Now I saw how, as the rubbery limb swept back and forth, seeking prey. With each arc, it extended more of itself onto land.

Watching it, I took in certain details. The movements weren't as graceful as the other times I'd seen those limbs. And the flesh itself seemed different. Mottled instead of pure black.

The limb bumped past me again and I dared to bring the light closer. This time I saw the truth: ragged holes and sloughing skin that oozed dark fluids. The wounds ran the whole length of it.

Injured! We'd damaged the foul creature after all. Weakened it, for sure. But how much? Enough for me to get the sample I needed before it crushed the life from me?

I shuffled to the side, purposely scuffing my feet on the ground. I remembered my other encounters, how those appendages would rise in snakelike fashion, revealing miniature eyes at their tips and hungry mouths down their lengths.

Nothing happened.

It continued to sweep the ground in the same pattern. Emboldened, I picked up a large stone and threw it a few feet to my left. This time the minor vibrations drew a reaction. The limb lifted up, exposing a gaping hole where the eye should have been.

Blind! The mouths still remained, teeth gnashing together in ravenous desperation, but although the tip moved to and fro, it never noticed me or my light.

This would be my best opportunity. I'd brought a scalpel among the other supplies I'd taken and now I withdrew it from its case. I placed the light on the ground and inched forward, timing my own movements to those of the beast. I'd only have one chance. I had to gauge it perfectly.

I waited until the tip slid by less than a foot away and then I lunged for it, grasping the vile flesh just below one of the mouth-suckers. A coating of slime and fluids made it almost impossible to hold onto. The limb twisted and coiled like a giant python wrapping around a helpless deer. I clung to it with one arm and my legs while with my other hand I slashed at the rubbery flesh. Even injured it possessed incredible strength. It began dragging me toward the river and I tightened my grip. The circular mouths gnawed at my clothing and I knew I only had seconds before they reached my skin.

A tremendous splashing commenced in the water, warning me of the beast's rising. Soon I'd either be drawn into that gigantic maw or I'd be drowned.

With a strength born of desperation, I stabbed the blade deep into the alien tissue and began to saw at it. A shudder ran through the limb. Ichor poured down my arm as I increased my attack on the stubborn flesh. The tentacle lifted into the air, taking me with it. Once more I found myself clinging in monkey-like fashion. Higher and higher it rose and a terrible image came to me, a giant hand swatting an insect, only I was the insect.

I tore at the ragged wound with nails and blade, clawing and cutting with reckless abandon, unmindful of losing a finger in my haste to complete my task.

And then it came free! The tip fell away, a good two feet of it, trailing vile liquids that drenched my clothing in putrid stench. The tentacle shuddered again and relaxed its hold on me. I let go and plunged to the ground, landing hard on my back.

A muffled roar shook the earth. I felt the beast's cry of pain in my very bowels. The tentacle slammed down inches from my legs and only providence saved me as it slid away in the other direction instead of pushing me into the river, where a massive turbulence sent waves crashing against the shore and splashed ice-cold water over me.

I grabbed the still-twitching length of flesh and made a hasty escape, hunched over, sure that at any moment I'd be plucked like a grape or flattened into a bloody pulp. But my luck held and I made it back to the rocks where I'd left Flora, the glow of my torch a beacon guiding me to safe harbor.

Terror, cold, and insane hope combined to rack my body with tremors. Despite my distance from the water I imagined the creature's deadly appendages creeping toward me, leaving me with only minutes to complete my task. The first time I tried to insert the needle into the stolen flesh it glanced off the thick rubbery skin and stabbed my hand. The glass syringe slipped from my fingers and I made a desperate grab for it, catching it just before it broke against a rock.

Forcing myself to take several deep breaths in an effort to calm my trembling hands left me with a mild case of vertigo and I had to lean back against the boulder before it passed. Either the cool stone against my neck or the extra oxygen in my lungs accomplished what I needed, because when I lifted the needle again I was able to plunge it accurately into one of the grotesque vessels within the fetid-smelling stump. A sense of loathing overcame me as I watched dark ichor flow into the syringe, and only the knowledge that those otherworldly fluids held the power to grant life allowed me to finish my task without throwing limb and syringe into the river.

I had no idea how much of the thing's blood I needed, so I filled the cylinder. Then came the hardest part.

Injecting that gory essence into the woman I loved.

I lifted Flora's pale arm and placed the tip of the needle against her bruised skin. I was about to press down on the plunger when the tenets of basic anatomy came to me and I cursed my own stupidity.

Flora was dead. A corpse. Which meant her heart no longer beat and blood no longer flowed through her arteries. Injecting the alien plasma into her arm would do nothing.

So where, then?

My father's tale had said nothing about where the mother-beast had pierced him, nor where he'd accomplished the same foul deed on the corpses he'd revived.

Think, Henry! Every second I hesitated meant less of a chance of returning Flora to life. I tried to consider the possibilities from a scientific point of view. Abdomen, lungs, heart—

Yes! The heart. The source of life within any body.

Before indecision hindered me again, I tore her blouse open and stabbed the needle between two ribs, left of center between her breasts. Mumbling a quick prayer, I depressed the plunger with my thumb and emptied the black liquid into her heart.

I tossed the empty needle aside and covered her up as best I could. How long would I need to wait? According to my father, his return had taken months. But the corpses he revived came back to life in three days or less.

"As long as it takes, I will wait for you," I whispered. And if she didn't wake, then Flannery or the space-beast could do with me as they wished. Without Flora, nothing mattered.

Exhausted, I closed my eyes and began my vigil.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I came awake with a gasp.

There was no sense of confusion. I knew immediately where I was, in that accursed cavern. Cold, aching muscles groaned in protest and rough stone scraped my back as I stood and looked around. Something had roused me from my unexpected slumber. The shuffle of alien flesh creeping up? The footsteps of the law coming to place me in custody? I snatched the light from the ground and swung it back and forth. Peered behind my shelter of rocks.

Nothing.

Unconvinced of my safety, I circled the area, aiming my light in all directions, gun clutched in my other hand. My heart drummed madly against my ribs and clammy sweat broke out on my brow. Only when I'd assured myself that no other tracks but mine marred the earth did I return to Flora's motionless body.

Only a dream, I thought, kneeling down beside her. And now the awful reality.

Flora was still dead.

I lifted her cold hand and pressed it against my cheek. Failure gnawed at me worse than any demon's bite. Logic told me it hadn't even been a day, I might have to wait much longer, but my heart whispered a different story, that I was only fooling myself. There'd be no revival for my Flora; she'd either been dead too long for the creature's supernatural blood to work or it required something other than blood, some mixture of fluids I'd gotten wrong.

My tears ran in cold streams down my face as my sorrow finally burst free. I wept like a baby, on my knees in that underground tomb, my lover's lifeless flesh held in my own. All my dreams, my reasons to live, were no more. I'd risked everything to save her, to save the damned town, and for what?

The only person I'd ever loved was lost to me forever. I'd sacrificed

everything, and for naught. Gone were my friends – Scott to my father's evil spawn, Ben to my own selfish plans. I had no career to speak of. In fact, all I had to look forward to were years of examining corpses that no one gave two tinker's damns about.

In other words, I had nothing.

I laid Flora's hand on her chest, folded her other over it. I could still do one thing right. I'd make sure she had the best possible burial. Even if it took every last penny I had. The finest gravestone money could buy. And then I'd return to the drudgery of my banal existence until it finally grew to be too much and I threw myself into the river.

Or perhaps not.

No doubt Ben had the police looking for me at that very moment. I'd stolen a corpse, and no amount of recent goodwill from the police would keep them from taking me in. If I was lucky, they might blame my crime on overwhelming grief and lock me away in Arkham. What irony that would be, following my father full circle after all.

Or perhaps I'd simply die in jail, a fitting end to a wretched life.

Still, I had to return her. She deserved a proper burial. I owed her that much. After all, it was because of me and my foolish actions that she'd died.

Guilt brought fresh tears and I squeezed my eyes shut against them. All of this was just delaying the inevitable; I needed to bite the bullet and carry Flora to the surface, even if it meant closing the door on the few things that had ever been good in my life. It was time to think of her first, not myself, for once. To—

A low moan whispered through the cavern.

The creature had returned!

My eyes sprang open and I glanced wildly about.

No demons approached.

I wondered if the sound had escaped my own throat and then I heard it again. This time I discerned that it came from nearby. Below me.

Flora!

I fell to my knees and shone the light on her face. Was that a flutter of her eyelids or a trick of the light? I gripped the torch with both hands to steady it.

Her eyes opened and closed. Again. Her lower lip twitched. One hand slid off her chest.

She was alive!

I dropped the light and patted her cheeks. Her flesh still held the chill of death. I took off my coat and placed it over her.

"Flora." I rubbed her arms and shoulders to get her circulation flowing. "Can you hear me? It's Henry. I'm here."

Another moan, accompanied by her head rolling side to side. Her eyes opened again and this time stayed that way. I grabbed her face and held it still.

"Flora! It's me. Say something."

Her lips moved. I bent closer, caught the barest of whispers.

"Henry? What…?"

The tickle of her breath against my ear faded. Her eyes closed and her body stopped moving.

But she still breathed, stronger now. I slid my arms under her and stood. Dormant aches and pains in my back and ribs woke at their renewed mistreatment. I ignored the discomfort and lurched toward the tunnel, the light tucked under one arm. Everything else I left behind. I had no need for it anymore.

All I desired was in my hands.

The return to the sewer entrance took an eternity, with me moving slowly so as not to bump Flora against the stone walls. My injuries made every step a battle, my muscles trembling and my nerves afire.

"Keep moving. Can't stop." I kept repeating the words to myself, urging my legs to shuffle forward. In between, I spoke to Flora, in case she could hear me despite her somnolent state.

"It will be all right. We're going home. I'll take care of you."

We staggered on, me reeling and swaying like a drunkard returning home in the wee hours of the morning. Spiderwebs clung to my face and hair and showers of dirt rained down on us. With no way to brush them aside I simply kept moving, straining to see as the electric light faded to a dull yellow and detritus clouded my vision.

When we finally reached the ladder, a new obstacle presented itself. How to get Flora to the surface? I tried once more to wake her, thinking that if she could rouse herself enough to at least stand I could push her up. But she merely moaned and shivered. In the end, I slung her over one shoulder like a sack of flour.

Climbing the ladder that way sapped the last of my dwindling strength and when we reached the surface it was all I could do not to collapse next

to her prone form. Only my dogged insistence on getting her to a place of safety kept me on my feet.

In my state of exhaustion it took me a moment to realize night had fallen. After so many hours in the dark the muted light of the fog-obscured streetlamps seemed bright as day. No police waited for us, a bit of luck that I gave quick thanks for. Still, even at night I couldn't hope to carry Flora all the way to my home without being seen. Or losing consciousness.

That was when providence came to my rescue.

The clatter of hooves on cobblestones caught my attention and I turned, half expecting to find a paddy wagon approaching.

Instead, I beheld the wondrous sight of Fudge ambling toward me, cart in tow. For all the hours I'd been gone, she'd remained where I'd left her, ignored by police and thieves alike.

"Good old Fudge," I said, stroking her muzzle. Her loyalty brought unexpected tears to my eyes. How fitting that an aged, pigheaded horse would end up my only true friend.

I wasted no time loading Flora into the cart and covering her with linens. Then it was off to my house, where my night of miracles continued. No police stood outside. Either they'd come and gone or Ben had yet to alert them.

With the thickening fog providing a cover for my illicit actions, I brought Flora inside and up to my bedroom. There I bathed her face and arms with a damp cloth, removing the worst of the grime from the night's excursion. She still appeared more dead than alive, her skin pale as the bedsheets, her eyes sunken into dark hollows. But her chest rose and fell, assuring me of continued life.

I sat by the bed for a while, my eyes fixed on my beautiful miracle. A few times I reached out, brushed her limp hair away from her face. I stroked her hand, marveling at how the wound on her arm had healed to a pale scar. I refused to turn my back for even a second, for fear that in a moment of inattention she might stop breathing.

A soft whinny from outside reminded me I had other responsibilities to deal with. Fudge needed to be returned to her stable; her presence on the street would bring unwanted attention. Even more importantly, my cupboards were bare. Flora would require food and drink in order to regain her strength before we left Innsmouth. Because one thing had

become perfectly apparent to me as I contemplated my gift from the gods.

We couldn't stay in town.

Hero I might be, but I had no doubt that bringing a dead woman to life would just as quickly turn me into a villain of the worst kind in the eyes of the citizens. In league with the Devil, or at least demons. Conducting godless experiments on corpses.

He's just like his father! they'd cry, and this time they'd be right. Not the transmogrified creature who'd consorted with evil to destroy the city, but rather the human who'd acted out of love to save someone dear to them. Only no one would see it that way. I'd be locked in a cell forever and Flora…she'd likely as not be burned alive as an abomination.

We had to escape, and sooner rather than later. Like my original plan so long ago before she was injured. We would hide in my house until she had enough strength to travel and then leave under cover of darkness, make a new start somewhere far away. Texas, perhaps. Or California. A place where people valued privacy and a man's reputation was based on his skills and ethics, not his family history. It angered me that instead of beginning our new life with a hero's reward in my pocket we'd be penniless and bereft of status, but so be it.

Better alive and poor than dead.

With Flora showing no signs of waking, I took a chance and exited the house through the back door. After returning Fudge and rewarding her with extra hay and some sweet carrots, I located a grocer who was still open despite the late hour. Upon leaving the rather disreputable place – his customers appeared more interested in laying bets than purchasing food – I made my way home, keeping to the alleys and side streets. Even my brief appearance in public had my stomach in knots and I did my best to stay out of sight, preferring the possible risks of cutpurses to the very real danger of arrest and imprisonment.

My nerves didn't calm until after I'd shut and locked my door behind me and pulled the shades down on all the windows.

After checking on Flora, who still slumbered like a bewitched fairy-tale princess, I fixed myself a meal of cured meats and cheese and brought a second plate up to the bedroom, along with a book from my library. After placing the food on the nightstand, I took my seat and attempted to read. But within a few pages I found my eyes closing and my head dropping to my chest.

That wouldn't do. I needed to be awake and alert when Flora woke. So I went to my washbasin and scrubbed the worst of the grime from my face, neck, and arms. Then I changed into clothes more suitable for traveling: rough black trousers and simple white shirt that could be paired with an afternoon jacket, a heavy sweater, or a coat, depending on the weather. I was just smoothing my dampened hair back when a sound from the bed brought me running to Flora's side, where I found her shaking her head and moaning, as if in the midst of a terrible dream.

"Flora," I said, patting her cheek. "Flora, can you hear me?"

Her eyes flew open and she gasped. Her body thrashed even more, and I held her arms.

"Flora! Calm yourself. You're safe now."

"Henry." Her wide-eyed gaze turned toward me and her body stilled. "Henry, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me." My tears threatened to return and I fought to keep them at bay. She was awake! And coherent. Truly, I'd worked a miracle.

"Where…what place is…?"

Before I could answer, her wild terror returned and she lashed out with her arms.

"No! It's coming! In the dark, there's something in the dark… after me…."

Flora's voice trailed away, only to be replaced by a long, low moan. Despite the impropriety of it, I gathered her in my arms and pulled her to my chest, held her tight.

"There's nothing can hurt you now, my love. You're safe with me. I swear. The monsters are all gone."

"Monsters, yes. There were monsters." Her lips moved against my shoulder. "I can't remember them, but I know they were there. Coming for me in the night. Oh!"

Her words changed to sobs and her tears dampened my neck. Her fingers clutched at my back, nails digging into my skin through the thin cloth of my shirt.

"Hush, hush," I said, keeping my voice soft. I wanted to shout with joy but now was the time to soothe her, ease her fears. Our celebration could come later.

My gentle ministrations worked. Gradually her grip on me relaxed and her sobbing faded to a whimper. When even that disappeared, I

reluctantly laid her back on the pillows. This time when she looked at me the fear had left her eyes, replaced by sleepy confusion.

"Henry? You've come to visit. So nice. But I'm so tired. I think perhaps…."

Her eyes closed and she slipped away once more.

I returned to my chair, my own worries put to rest by the moment of clarity she'd shown. Likely as not there'd be more episodes of alarm and bewilderment in the days to come, but I was ready to help her through them.

For the first time since my banishment from medical college, I found myself looking forward to the rest of my life.

My Flora had come back from the other side with her mind and soul intact.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I was in the caverns again. An army of the dead pursued me, their bodies consumed with rot, bestial tentacles whipping to and fro, eager to rend my flesh. I staggered on exhausted legs, knowing that to pause or stumble meant certain death.

But my strength had neared its end and I saw no signs of escape ahead. Only one chance remained.

The river.

If I could somehow make it to the other side, I'd be safe. I veered to the side and reached the edge of the cliff. Impenetrable darkness hid the water and shoreline. If my leap didn't carry me far enough, or if the waters were too shallow, I'd end my life broken and bleeding. Food for the animals – or worse.

The stench of corruption grew strong. No time to think about it. I jumped, putting every last bit of strength into my attempt.

For a moment my body weighed nothing and a queer feeling passed over me, a sense of time moving too slow and too fast all at once. I saw the river rising up toward me while somehow viewing my own body descending, as if I possessed two pairs of eyes.

Then the river struck me with a cold slap and stole the air from my lungs. I sank like a stone, down, down, the bottom seemingly forever out of reach.

Two enormous eyes appeared in the blackness, sickly yellow orbs with black holes in their centers, holes that contained millions of twinkling stars.

"Welcome, my son," rumbled a deep, sonorous voice in my head.

I came awake with a cry. Arrows of pain shot through my back as I sat up, letting me know I'd spent several hours asleep in the chair.

My heart beat too fast and I placed a hand on my chest, willing it to slow. Cold sweat covered my brow and my breath came in harsh gasps.

That damned cavern, still haunting me. Would I never be free of it? And that voice at the end, not my father's, yet somehow familiar. Although all I wanted to do was rid my mind of those evil tones, I tried to remember where I'd heard it. Perhaps then I could rid myself of—

"Henry?"

Flora! All other considerations fled my mind as I turned my attention toward her.

"Right here," I said, taking her hand. Her eyes had regained their color, that sharp blue that seemed to mirror her inner fire.

"I've been ill, haven't I?" She frowned as she spoke.

"Yes, but you're doing much better now. What do you remember?"

The furrows in her brow grew deeper. "Scott. His funeral. I didn't feel well, and I blamed it on my nerves. But after…after the fire, I felt worse. And one morning, Ben and I, we were going somewhere and I felt faint…." She shook her head. "The rest is all just cotton fuzz. Bits and pieces and…oh!"

Her other hand went to her mouth and her eyes grew wide. She was still so pale. I could see the blue lines of her veins through the thin skin on her neck and the backs of her hands.

"What is it?" I rubbed her cold palm, forgetting all about decorum in our shared distress.

"I remember that I was angry with you. That I blamed you for Scott's death. For those awful creatures that attacked us. But Ben kept telling me it wasn't your fault." She gripped my hand in hers. "I'm sorry, Henry. I should never have doubted you."

"It's all right." I patted her arm. "And the creatures are gone. All of them. The police and I, we killed them and the awful thing that spawned them. Burned them and then buried them under tons of stone."

I almost asked her if she remembered being in the caverns, but my throat closed around the words. Better she didn't recover that memory, now or ever. And Ben…he'd defended me? Guilt rose up in my breast. Cad and womanizer he might be, but he'd remained a friend, despite what I'd thought. What I'd accused him of. I owed him an apology. Once Flora and I were safely out of town, I would send it to him.

"I had nightmares about them," Flora said, and it seemed the dark hollows beneath her eyes grew darker just from thinking about those dreams. "They came after me in my sleep, which I think I must have been doing a lot of. How long has it been, Henry? And how did I get here, in your house?"

"I'll tell you, but first you need something to eat. And drink. You must regain your strength."

"Oh, yes." For the first time since her revival, Flora's lips curved up in a weak semblance of her old smile. "I'm famished."

I passed her the extra plate I'd fixed and she dug into the meat with an almost indecent vigor, hunger overruling good manners as she tore pieces of ham and sausage with her fingers and swallowed them after only a few perfunctory chews.

When she showed no signs of slowing, I left her alone just long enough to go downstairs and fetch more meat and cheese, along with a jug of watered-down wine to give her blood some energy. I'd half expected her to be asleep again when I returned, but I found her sitting up in bed, the covers drawn up to her neck for modesty's sake.

She dove into the second plate with just as much enthusiasm, pausing just long enough to thank me around a mouth filled with food. While she ate, I gave her an edited version of what had happened since she'd taken ill, how she'd been moved from her own flat to Ben's apartment so that he and Callie could care for her, and then to the hospital when her condition grew worse.

I made sure to let her know that I'd come by as often as I could, and that I'd returned to her as soon as I completed my hero's work with the police.

"And how did I get from the hospital to here?"

While speaking, I'd prepared myself for that part of the tale, anticipating that a sharp mind such as Flora's would hone in on that aspect.

"The doctors…. You were very sick, Flora. Very, very sick. Feverish. Unable to speak, or even open your eyes. And you must have lapsed into such a state of lethargy that…well, safe to say the physicians in Innsmouth are not the best. They mistook your somnolence for death and had you transported to the morgue."

"What?" Flora's mouth fell open and bits of sausage tumbled out. "Dead? I died?"

"No." I hastened to ease her consternation. "They merely thought you dead. It was I who discovered the truth and stole you from that place, brought you here."

Inspiration struck at that moment and I hurried to continue before she asked further questions. "And that is why you need to regain your strength. We have to leave Innsmouth, right away. For you see, the police will be after me for what I've done."

"I don't understand." Her frown returned. "You saved my life. Why would that be wrong?"

I feigned a deep sigh and shook my head. "Because of who I am. The

son of Silas Gilman, the man who courted evil and brought the dead back to life. Do you think anyone in this town will believe you were merely unconscious, that I simply revived you with smelling salts? No, after what my father did, after what Flannery and the others saw down in that cavern, they'll assume I've followed my father's wicked footsteps. I'll be sentenced to death, and so will you."

"Me?" Now alarm replaced confusion on Flora's face. "Why me?"

"They'll think you a monster, my dearest." Bitterness and guilt lent an emotional hitch to my voice. I lied, yes, but in a way I also spoke the truth. Because of what I'd done, Flora was doomed if she remained in Innsmouth. And the dolts who ran the town wouldn't have the intelligence to see the difference between my father's actions and my own, between the monsters he'd created and the life I'd saved.

Flora started to speak and then paused. Her mouth closed and her lips pursed. I recognized that look. She was deeply unhappy and considering her next actions. Had we been in the tavern, like as not someone would be about to receive a severe tongue lashing, or perhaps even a knee in their privates. Flora Marsh took no guff from anyone.

To my credit, I didn't step back, despite a strong desire to do so. Perhaps what I'd experienced below the streets of Innsmouth had made me braver, stronger.

Or simply killed my instinct for self-preservation.

But then the sharp angles of her face softened, the viperish gaze faded from her eyes, and she shocked me by nodding. "Yes, you're right. This is a town filled with small-minded people. I will go anywhere you think is best for us."

"Truly?" Astonishment and relief overtook me and I lost all sense of good judgment. Forgetting her weakened state and her state of undress, I took her in my arms and pulled her against my chest.

"Yes, my dearest, truly." She returned the embrace and such was my emotional state that it took several moments for me to realize the sheets had fallen away between us and only two thin layers of cotton separated her skin from mine. The softness of her womanly attributes brought sudden heat to my face, while her words – had she really said them? My dearest? – sent shivers of pleasure through my belly.

My mind – the rational part, the part trained by society to follow the rules and behave as a polite man at all times – shouted at me to step away, to

halt my licentious behavior before it advanced from impolite to offensively improper. Flora was neither wife nor fiancée; nor was she strumpet or casual liaison.

Something had changed, though, and my rational mind no longer held sway.

Instead of submitting to respectability, I leaned down and pressed my lips against hers.

And she returned the kiss.

There was no hesitation on Flora's part. She tossed decorum to the wind as swiftly as I. My heart leaped as her cold flesh drew warmth from mine and her hands gripped my shoulders with surprising strength, given her condition. The last of my concerns about our reputations melted away and as if in a dream I found myself slipping the nightshirt off her shoulders and running trembling hands across her exposed body.

Each touch stoked the flames of my ardor further and Flora responded in kind, undoing the buttons of my clothes until nothing stood between us except the hairs of my chest. I fell upon her like a ravenous beast and when she spread her legs for me I quickly found my way into that most treasured of caves.

The ease with which I slipped into her informed me that my dear Flora was no stranger to the pleasures of the flesh, a fact that gave me momentary pause – who had she been with? Had Ben Olmstead beaten me to the prize? – but then I forgot all concerns as we consummated our undeniable lust. Flora cried out and urged me on, and I'm not ashamed to admit that her coarse language played no small part in bringing me to my own summit of pleasure.

It was over all too soon. Our intense exertions left me panting and damp with sweat, and I drew the sheets back over us before her chill spread to me.

As we lay there, her head resting upon my shoulder, my hand across her womanly pillows – just the feel of them had me thinking about pleasuring ourselves again – sudden insecurity caused me to question her earlier statement.

"You called me your dearest," I said, brushing strands of her hair from my cheek. "Did you mean that?"

"I did," she stated. "It's always been you, Henry Gilman. I knew that one day we'd be together."

"But you never said anything." I thought back to how she'd always acted with us. Flirtatious to be sure, but that was her nature. Or so I'd thought.

"And you never asked me out, now did you?" She favored me with a soft laugh.

"If I had, would you have said yes?" I was already cursing myself for letting opportunity pass. Had we been together before, how different would things be now? Certainly I might not have been in the alley that night to cross paths with my cursed father. Scott would be alive, Flora uninjured…but then, with my father's plan undetected, we might all be dead, victims of his insanity.

"Not at first." Another giggle. "I enjoyed our little game too much." Her voice grew serious. "But the time for games is over, I fear. If what you say is true…."

"It is." Her reminder of our situation banished any thoughts of further randy behavior. At least for the moment. "We'll need to go to your place, pack a trunk. And then—"

The heavy pounding of a fist against my front door stopped me mid-sentence. I made to get up and then an all-too-familiar voice froze me in place.

"Open the door, Henry! I know you're in there. What have you done with her?"

Ben Olmstead had found us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Before heading downstairs, I peered through the window to make sure Ben hadn't brought the police with him. To my great relief, it was just him and his ever-present shadow, Callie, standing there in the gray of the afternoon sun. She wore a somber sweater and skirt in dark charcoal, while Ben looked like he'd grabbed the nearest items off the floor, stained pants and a gray cotton shirt he hadn't bothered to tuck in.

"Stay up here and don't make any noise," I cautioned Flora. "I'll send him on his way and then we can depart before he returns."

Already I had a story in mind, one that would put him off our track long enough for us to make our escape.

Flora nodded and I went down to get the door before Ben's continued knocking drew unwanted attention.

"All right, all right, what's all the ruckus?" I said by way of greeting as I threw open the door. I'd mussed my hair and left my shirt over my pants to lend credence to my story, that they'd roused me from a deep sleep.

I'd also slipped my pistol into my pants pocket, just in case it came to that.

"What in blazes have you done with her, you morbid bastard?" Ben's eyes were alight with fury and he pushed past me in rude fashion.

"Here, now!" I cried. "Have some manners."

"You deserve no courtesies beyond the one I've already given by not going to the police first off. I'll give you this one chance to tell me where the body is, or I'm off to the nearest precinct."

"I tried to stop him," Callie said, worry etched on her face.

"What body?" I asked, ignoring her. His talk of the police brought a weakness to my legs that I fought to hide. I couldn't let that happen. "You're talking like a crazy man."

"Don't play games, Henry. I'm in no mood." He clenched his fists and red fire colored his cheeks.

"Flora," Callie said, positioning herself between her brother and me. "Flora's body is missing."

"And you stole her."

"Missing?" I feigned astonishment. "How can this be?"

"You know damn well how it can be." He pointed a thick finger at me. "You went to see her and now she's gone. I don't know what sick thing you've done with her, but I want her back so she can get the decent burial she deserves."

"I swear, I had nothing to do with it." I held up my hands. Putting my fear to good use, I went into the sitting room and collapsed into a chair. Ben and Callie followed, him looking ready to beat the truth out of me, her with a slight frown of uncertainty. I had to play to that, build up their doubt so that they'd follow other possibilities. Possibilities I would bring up.

"I went to see her, yes. Of course I did. I loved her, same as you. More so, I'm sure. After I left her on that slab of ice, I returned here and went to bed, and I've not left the house since."

"It had to be you. Who else would do it?"

I waved my hands around the room. "What, you believe I've got her hidden in the house? That I'd bring a corpse here? For what purpose? And how would I do that without being seen? Did I walk across town with a dead woman on my shoulders?"

Ben opened his mouth to speak, but Callie interrupted. "His words make sense, brother. Perhaps there's another explanation."

Callie regarded me with a strange look in her eye. Not suspicion but something else, almost as if she were the one keeping a secret.

"You just want to believe his story because you fancy him." Ben's accusation brought color to her cheeks but to her credit she didn't back down. Seeing the distress he'd caused his sister, Ben took a deep breath, and when he spoke next his voice had lost a good deal of its former rage.

"Well, if you didn't take her, who did?"

I pretended to think, while silently thanking the gods for him giving me the opening I needed.

"Perhaps, with everything that has been happening recently, the grave robbings and such, some sick person thought to—"

Crash!

All three of us looked up at the sound of glass breaking in the room above us.

"Someone else is here." Ben started for the hallway and I leaped up.

"Wait!"

He paid no heed and pounded up the stairs. I followed, with Callie behind me.

"Mother of God."

I was three steps from the top when Ben's startled cry told me Flora hadn't hidden herself as I'd prayed she would. I entered the bedroom and found Ben and Flora equally pale and wide-eyed as they stared at each other.

"I can explain," I began, but Callie gasped and clutched my arm.

"She's alive! It's a miracle!"

"No, it's blasphemy." Ben pointed at Flora. "She's a demon, like the ones that attacked us."

Ben raised his walking stick and I pulled free from Callie's nails to step in front of Flora.

"No! Callie is right, it's truly a miracle. She's as alive as you or I, I swear on my own soul. I can explain everything. Hear me out before you make a terrible mistake."

Things might have gone horribly wrong except that Flora chose that moment to speak.

"Ben Olmstead, are you threatening me? You know damn well I'll put foot to arse if you so much as try to lay a finger on me or Henry. Now put that cane down and listen to what he has to say."

With my back to her, I could have sworn it was the Flora of old. I pictured her eyes afire and ready to back up her sharp tongue with physical violence. The words had the desired effect, giving Ben pause.

"Is this more witchery?" he asked, his eyes narrowed.

"Not the kind you're thinking," I answered. "But whether science or sorcery or God's grace, it's truly Flora who stands before you."

"Perhaps we'd all best sit down," Callie said, pushing me out of the way and taking up a sheet to wrap around Flora's body. Shame brought heat to my face as I realized she only wore the nightshirt I'd given her. Even a schoolchild could infer what had happened between us. I saw the color rise in Ben's cheeks as he comprehended the situation as well.

"Let's retire to the study," I said. "I've got brandy, and I'll explain everything."

"Go." Callie motioned us out. "We'll be down momentarily."

She meant to dress Flora more properly, and I gave her a nod of thanks before ushering Ben down the stairs. By the time Callie and Flora – now clothed in one of my shirts and a pair of ill-fitting trousers – joined us, I'd already poured four glasses and taken a seat on the couch. Flora joined me, sitting close enough that our shoulders and legs touched, a fact that didn't go unnoticed by our unwanted visitors. Ben's scowl grew deeper, until his eyes nearly disappeared. Callie, on the other hand, favored us with a pleased smile, not the reaction I expected from her.

I launched into my sordid tale without any preamble, knowing Ben's notoriously limited patience. When I got to the part about encountering the demon creature in the caverns, Callie gasped and held both hands over her mouth. Ben made as if to get up and then sank back into his chair while I described the struggle to obtain the otherworldly fluids I needed to return Flora's life to her. For her part, Flora merely stared at me with raised brows, showing no sign of wrath for my previous falsehood regarding her condition.

As I spoke, my mind raced ahead of my words, selecting and discarding things to say so that I might portray my wicked actions in the best light. And in the midst of my despair and worry that I'd never convince Ben to keep our secret, I hit upon an idea so outlandish, so unbelievable, it might just work.

"You have to understand," I pleaded. "As evil as my father was, this creature was not the hell-spawn he believed it to be."

"What?" This time Ben leaped to his feet. "How can you say that? Just hearing your description tells me the opposite is true. It infected the dead with its vile progeny, turned them into bloody monsters."

"Yes, it did," I agreed, and that stopped Ben in his tracks. "But think on this: does not a fly do the same to a cow, laying its eggs in the flesh so they can consume it when the maggots hatch? Does not a leech attach itself to your skin and feast on your blood? And yet these awful creatures can also be used for good. Maggots eat decayed flesh from wounds, leeches heal bruises and swellings. How many of our medicines come from toxic plants? Penicillin comes from bread mold."

"None of them create monsters."

"No, but used incorrectly, left to their own devices, they can injure and kill. What I'm trying to say is, curatives can be found in the most

unusual of places. And this creature, this terrible beast, is not a demon. Rather, it is a form of life humans have never before encountered, because it came from the stars. Its eggs are deadly inside the human body. But its blood…it has amazing regenerative powers. Think how a lizard will regrow its own tail. This is a thousand times beyond that. Something in that alien fluid can cause a heart to beat again, the brain to think again. It's not evil, it's a miracle of science."

Ben started to object, but Callie put a hand on his arm. "Brother, if what he says is true, then Flora really has returned to us. You can't consider hurting her."

"It is true," Flora said. "I'm right here, good as new. Look." She held her arm up, showing the pale scar that was the only sign of her former injury. "I'm healed. Thanks to Henry."

She took my hand in hers and squeezed it. I returned the gesture.

"I still think it's an affront to God." Ben shook his head. "Man shouldn't have the power over life and death."

"Really?" I asked. "Isn't that what physicians do in hospitals all the time, with their medicines and their surgeries? Try to prevent death? What purpose do doctors have if not to keep people from dying? I've merely succeeded at the one thing where all others failed."

Ben scratched at his thick beard. He wore a different scowl now, one that indicated he was thinking hard on what he'd heard. The weight of my gun against my leg reminded me that if he decided to come at me with his cane, or run outside to call the police, I still had a solution, although I was loath to use it.

"How is this possible—" he gestured at Flora, "—without deviltry? The Lord doesn't work this way."

"Who are we to know that?" Callie asked, firmly in my camp now. "People have spoken of miracles throughout the ages."

"Exactly." I leaned forward, focusing my gaze on Ben. "I don't pretend to understand what's happened. Magic, medicine, or God's favor, it doesn't matter to me. I'm simply grateful to have her back and I don't intend to let anyone take her away again. Not you, not the police, not the small-minded people of Innsmouth. That's why we're leaving."

"Leaving?" Callie started as if poked. "But where will you go?"

"Away from here. Someplace we can commence a new life together. Out west, perhaps."

"And you're fine with this?" Ben turned his attention to Flora. "Leaving behind all that you know."

"I am," she said, and my heart soared. "As long as Henry and I are together, that's all that matters."

Ben's face grew red again, but for a different reason. The game we'd played for so long had reached its conclusion, the decision cast in my favor. Callie did a better job of hiding her regret, only a narrowing of her eyes giving away her distress.

Seeing them that way, my oldest friend and the woman who might well have been my wife had it not been for Flora, I experienced a tug at my heart that I hadn't expected. That is my only explanation for the words that escaped me next.

"You can come with us, if you wish. But we leave today."

"No." Ben spoke as if I'd asked him to cut off his own legs. "I won't be party to your insanity."

"I'll go."

"What?" Ben turned sharply to face his sister. "You're considering this madness?"

Callie shook her head. "Not considering it. I've made up my mind. I will accompany them."

"You can't. I forbid it."

"You don't own me, brother. I am an independent woman, with my own money." She lifted her chin and squared her shoulders, the Miskatonic brooch on her chest glinting in the lamplight, a subtle reminder to me of all she'd be giving up if she joined us. Her expression acquired a defiant cast I'd never seen on her before. "Henry and Flora are like family, the only family we have left. They'll need my help. Besides, what if those things Henry encountered aren't dead? Could you really ever sleep soundly in Innsmouth again knowing what lies beneath the streets?"

"You've all lost your minds." Ben stared at each of us in turn. "How can you consider this?"

"How can you not?" Callie asked.

"My friends, Flora and I have no choice in the matter. The council will drive us out of town or hang us the moment they find out what I've done. You two, though, you have jobs and you have each other. If you choose to stay, I don't hold it against you."

Secretly, I hoped they would remain behind. I didn't need Ben around,

for he'd either eventually want Flora for his own or act on his belief she was an abomination. And Callie…it was obvious why she wanted to come, why she was willing to leave her position at the university. She still pined for me. And that, too, would only lead to trouble at some later time.

I stood up, and Flora rose with me, still holding my hand. "Our decision is made. We're leaving tonight. If you're coming, you need to pack. If not, this is where we bid you farewell."

To my surprise, Ben heaved himself out of his chair, a broad grin on his face.

"Well, I guess I'm daft as a bedbug as well. I can't let the three of you go off on some wild adventure without me."

Callie clapped her hands and lifted her glass.

"To adventure."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

In typical Callie Olmstead fashion, she took on the role of mother hen and told me in no uncertain terms that I would not be accompanying Flora to her flat.

"You and Ben can pack your clothes and get us a carriage, but there will be no men pawing through Flora's unmentionables just because you're in a hurry to leave."

She narrowed her eyes at me as she said this, a not-so-gentle reminder that I'd already broken all the rules of polite society. Not five minutes into our new life and I was regretting opening my mouth and inviting them to join us. Between the two Olmsteads, I'd likely not get a minute's peace until I made Flora an honest woman, something I fully intended to do but only when we'd reached a safe haven and settled down.

The two ladies left, although not before I took Flora aside and inquired if she felt strong enough to walk the several blocks to her apartment. Her pallor had deepened and she appeared ready to collapse.

"I'll be fine," she insisted, waving me off with a bony hand. Her stomach let out a loud growl and she smiled. "Nothing a good meal can't fix, is all."

I dug into my pocket and pulled out several coins. "Stop and get something, then. I'll pack more food for the ride."

She kissed my cheek. I pretended not to notice Callie's frown as they departed.

Ben's hand came down on my shoulder. "So, how do you want to do this? I assume you mean to steal a carriage rather than spend our limited funds."

"In a manner of fashion," I said. My idea to take the morgue's cart no longer fit our plan, not with two extra passengers. We'd need something larger to hold the four of us and our luggage. "Let me finish packing and then we'll go to your place so you can do the same. After that, we'll get a carriage, load it, and go to Flora's."

"We'll save time if I go to gather my things now, then you can pick me up on the way."

I understood from his tone that things still weren't square between us, and perhaps never would be. Despite his outward enthusiasm, he'd agreed to come only because of Callie's insistence and his feelings for Flora.

Plus, he didn't want to be involved in the theft. If I got caught, he'd be free to bend Flora and Callie to his will.

I'll deal with you later, Ben Olmstead, I thought. For now, the important thing was departing Innsmouth as quickly as possible, and Ben's idea would likely help in that regard.

It took me less than fifteen minutes to fill a trunk with a change of clothes, a heavy coat, and a few of my medical books in case we ran into some kind of emergency. In a smaller bag I added the contents of my liquor cabinet, my small stock of medicines, and the last of the cheese and bread from the kitchen.

I left everything by the back door and set out to find us a carriage. A twenty-minute walk brought me to the Innsmouth Cab Company. Several hansoms waited out front, but none were large enough for what we required. Instead, I entered the building and asked for the manager. A short, stout fellow with hair graying at the temples nodded to me.

"Frederic Hazelton, at your service. How can I help you?"

"I need a carriage. Large enough for four persons."

"And may I enquire as to your purpose?"

"A funeral," I said. "My aunt has passed, and I am taking my parents and sister to Newbury for the burial."

"My condolences. So you're looking to hire both driver and carriage? For how many days?"

"No driver. Just the carriage and horses. And it will be, hmmm…." I made a show of considering the time required "Four days. Possibly five, depending on the weather."

"I see. And how will you be paying for this?" Hazelton looked askance at my simple clothes.

"In coin." I placed several dollars on the counter. It hurt to part with such a large amount, but knowing I'd never be returning the carriage eased the pain somewhat. In the long run, we'd save a good deal of money by not having to pay for further transportation. It was my fervent hope that mentioning we were planning to travel north would steer Hazelton

and the police in that direction to look for us when he realized we'd absconded with his property. By then, we'd be well south and west of Massachusetts. Perhaps even past Pennsylvania. With any luck, they'd never find us.

Hazelton led me round back to a covered stable that held the special carriages, the ones reserved for when some high society bigwig or pompous politician required public transportation. At the end of the row stood one that was pure black and devoid of decoration. Unlike the others, it wasn't polished and shining, and more than a few nicks and scratches marred the paint.

"This is the best I can do for the price," he said. "I was getting ready to repaint it, but it will suffice for your trip, I think."

I nodded. It would do just fine. A four-seater with ample room for our luggage. Hazelton ordered one of the stable hands to get it ready and we went inside to sign the contract. I used a false name and address, hoping that would help cover our theft even further.

Hazelton supplied two black mares, rather long in the tooth but not in such bad shape that they couldn't do a decent day's travel. I offered no objection; for the price, they were a bargain. I rode off, more than a little guilt digging at me for having cheated an honest man. Still, I would move heaven and earth to keep Flora safe. If that meant breaking the law or bending my principles, so be it.

I returned to my house and loaded my trunk and bag into the carriage. Before departing, I took a last look at the place. It harbored few pleasant memories and I wasn't sorry to be leaving. My only regret was that I couldn't sell it. The money would have gotten us off to a nice start in our new life.

"Ah, good riddance. Let it die with my father."

Ben was waiting when I arrived, one large trunk at his feet. He'd dressed for the road, with a black jacket and derby hat. In his left hand he carried his favorite cane, the one with the silver wolf's head handle.

After climbing into the seat beside me, he tapped the cane on the footboard and gave a whistle. "You picked a good ride, Henry. I hope you have the coin to feed these nags. It's a long ride to California."

I swore. That was something I hadn't thought of. Ben laughed. "Don't get your knickers in a bother. I'll help out. I stopped at the bank and withdrew the largest sum I could without raising too many eyebrows."

"Thank you." I tried not to think what Ben might demand in return for his largesse.

We rode to Flora's and my heart grew lighter with each street we crossed. We were really doing it! Leaving Innsmouth. For once, the future looked bright. A fresh start would be difficult, to be sure. But with Flora at my side I felt as if I could conquer the world.

Neither Ben nor I were surprised when we found the sidewalk outside Flora's building empty. Independent they might both be, but no self-respecting woman would ever think of carrying luggage down from a third-floor apartment.

The approaching dusk cast the street in shadows, lending a decidedly threatening air to the neighborhood. I was hesitant to leave the carriage unattended, but just as I started to mention this to Ben a terrible scream caused us both to jump and draw our pistols. Despite our urgent situation, we both ran in the direction of the single, pain-filled cry. I know not Ben's reasons, but my own were purely selfish: to ascertain if the ruckus would draw the attention of the police, thereby making our departure more problematic.

Half a block down sat the dark mouth of an alley. We slowed and peered into its gloomy depths. Sure enough, two figures occupied the narrow passageway. One prone on the ground, the other bent over it, quite obviously up to no good. Pistol raised, I charged into the alley, Ben at my side.

"Hey, now! Stop that."

The figure on top looked up.

Flora!

We came to a halt several feet away. Dark fluids coated her face and dripped from her chin onto her clothes. In the dim light it appeared as if someone had splashed a bucket of pitch at her. Except I already knew what it was.

Blood.

I didn't need to see the body beneath her to know what she'd done, but the details of it embedded themselves in my brain because I couldn't look away.

A gaping hole in his neck showed in grisly detail how the poor bastard had died, his throat torn away to expose the tubes and vessels within. A larger wound in his belly leaked grotesque fluids and what looked like rows

of sausage spilled out over the edges and onto the ground. As we drew closer, the unmistakable warm stink of fresh shit reached us.

"Good Lord. What in hell…?" Ben's words trailed off and he gripped my arm. Flora stared up at us from her knees, her eyes two wide, white buttons behind a mask of red.

"Henry? Ben? What's the matter?"

"Flora…what have you done?" I could only manage a whisper, but she heard me.

"I don't know." She looked at her hands, which still held a dripping piece of organ meat. "I was so hungry. There was no food in the house." She raised the bloody chunk to her mouth and bit into it.

Ben gasped and turned away, his hand over his mouth.

"Have to eat," Flora said, her words muffled by the human flesh stuffing her mouth. "So hungry."

Cold dread filled my belly. How could she have done this? The obvious answer was I'd somehow infected her with one of the alien creatures, but that couldn't be right. She showed none of the signs. No tentacles emerging, no transformation into some kind of sea creature.

Just a taste for human flesh.

No. Not my Flora. It had to be something else.

Brain trauma.

Yes! That was it. After all, she'd been dead for several hours. The creature's blood hadn't finished repairing her body yet. That's why she wasn't acting herself. Why she was so starved for food. She needed the energy, the nutrients, to rebuild herself. She'd probably gone into some kind of fugue state when the hunger got to be too much and….

A new thought came to me. How had Flora come to be in the alley in the first place?

"Callie!" Ben stole the word from my thoughts.

"Go." I waved at him. I'll be right behind you."

Ben took off at a run. I approached Flora slowly, my hands out to my sides. As much as I feared for Callie's life, I had to get Flora out of the alley before someone found her in such a ghoulish state.

"Flora, dear, we need to leave."

She looked up at me, her eyes pure innocence behind their mask of blood. "But I'm not done."

"We'll get more food, I promise. But the police will be here soon and

this…." My words failed me then. If she truly didn't understand what she'd done, how could I explain it?

Luckily, she nodded and stood up, still holding a reddish-brown lump in one hand. I let her keep it. I took her by the other arm and guided her back to the carriage, where I got her inside and made her promise not to leave again. She gave me a distracted reply, already biting into her revolting meal.

Knowing I didn't have much time before she finished and went looking for another victim, I dashed up the stairs to her apartment, where I found Ben cradling a bloody Callie in his arms.

"She's alive," he said.

"Thank God for that." I meant it. Flora was first on my mind but I'd have felt awful if any real harm had come to Callie because of the situation I'd placed her in.

I knelt down to inspect her wounds: a deep gash in her thigh that looked suspiciously like a bite, and a purple welt on her temple where it appeared she'd fallen and struck her head. Her breathing was steady, and she moaned when I patted her cheek. Her eyes opened.

"Henry. I'm…sorry. I tried…she's not the…." Her head lolled back as consciousness departed again.

"See if you can find some spirits and clean cloths so we can sterilize and bind the wound. She's lost some blood but she should be fine as long as we prevent infection."

Just as I'd hoped, Ben hurried from the room without objecting. I checked Callie's breathing once more and then placed a pillow under her head and stood up. Ben was more than capable of dressing Callie's injuries. She shouldn't even require stitching. On the other hand, Flora needed me and I couldn't trust that she'd remain in the carriage.

I was halfway to the door when Ben called my name.

"Henry. Where in blazes do you think you're going?"

"To fetch a doctor," I said, thinking I only needed a few moments to make my escape. If I could get Ben to—

"You damned liar. You're still planning on taking Flora away from here. I won't let you. She's the cause of this, and so are you. You've created a bloody monster, and now we're taking her to the police."

"The hell you are." I didn't draw my gun, but the temptation was strong.

Ben let out a cry of pure animal rage and charged at me. His attack

caught me by surprise and I reacted far too slowly. One of his massive fists struck my shoulder as I tried to dodge him and I stumbled into a wall. His second fist missed me by inches and dented the plaster next to my face. He might have ended things right then – he was stronger and faster than I, and far more experienced at fisticuffs – but he made a fatal mistake.

He spoke.

"That creature won't see the light of day again for what she's done."

The possibility of Flora locked away forever in some cell – or worse, sentenced to hang – brought a rage to life within me that I'd never known I possessed. My vision turned red and I lashed out with blind fury. My knuckles met his nose with a sound like ice cracking. Ben howled and fell back. I threw myself at him, fists swinging wildly. Blow after blow landed on his face. He tried to push me away and I kicked him in the knee, feeling no shame at my womanly attack. He went down, holding his injured leg, and I kicked him again. And again. Until I felt sure he wouldn't get up to follow me.

Then I ran for the door. I paused before leaving, looking back at my old friend who was now my sworn enemy. He stared up at me with a face dripping in blood, his hair and beard now crimson instead of orange.

"I'm truly sorry for Callie's pain," I said, and I meant it. Had things been different in the world, Callie and I might have been betrothed already. "But I won't let you or anyone take Flora from me. I'm giving you warning. Don't come after us. If you do, I swear I'll take your life before you take ours."

Then I was out the door.

I knew I had only minutes to make my escape. The Ben Olmstead I knew wouldn't heed my warning; he was as hotheaded and stubborn as they came. Injured or not, he'd have the police on my trail the moment he took care of his sister's wounds. Maybe even before.

When I reached the carriage I half expected to find Flora gone again but she'd obeyed my command and stayed in her seat, which now was covered in tacky blood. Her eyes were half-closed, reminding me of a sated tiger after a large meal.

I climbed into the driver's seat and paused. Where to now? Ben would have the police after us within the hour. I couldn't go north, because I'd told the liveryman we were heading in that direction. And now south was closed to us as well, because Ben knew my planned route.

And how could I risk bringing Flora anywhere? Until her mind healed, she wouldn't be safe in any community. I had to find a way to return her to full sanity before we risked venturing out into the world. But how? I was no doctor of the mind, and I refused to even consider locking her away in some awful asylum. And what could they do anyhow except feed and watch her until she healed?

If that even happened.

The very real fear that Flora's condition might be permanent made me want to curse God for his treachery. It was he who'd sent that creature to our world, and he who'd put me and those I loved in harm's way. How could a simple man such as I hope to prevail against the supernatural?

The supernatural.

The moment the words appeared in my thoughts, I knew where to find the answer I required.

In the book of spells.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A sensation of déjà vu gripped me as I lowered myself into the dank sewer once more. My life seemed to be repeating itself, a terrible echo of time that grew worse with each reiteration. We'd exited the carriage several blocks away in an attempt to mask our true destination, but I had little hope my ruse would work. Ben would recite my tale of curing Flora to the police, and no doubt the moment Flannery heard the news he'd be sure to send officers into the tunnel to search for us.

With transportation and belongings gone, I'd already decided that our only chance would be to hide in the caverns until the police gave up their search. Then we'd take the sewers into Old Innsmouth, where we could follow the Manuxet River inland until we reached the point where it crossed the Miskatonic. From there, we'd make our way to the university and search the library until I found a way to translate the book of spells.

Assuming I found the damned thing.

If not, our only hope lay in making our way along the coast in the darkness of night to the next town south, or possibly farther if we could manage it.

I prayed that wouldn't be the case, as it would leave us in dire straits, made all the worse by Flora's inhuman hungers.

Chill air enveloped us and the rank stench of raw sewage filled my lungs, but I paid no heed. I led us forward, the route burned into my memory so that even without light I knew the correct direction. Flora followed close behind me without any complaint. That she placed her complete trust in me buoyed my heart and tempered any doubts I might have had regarding her soul. No one tainted by evil could give themselves so thoroughly, could show such love and devotion.

No, her problem stemmed not from corruption but from a medical cause. Whether physical or mental, that was to be determined. And whichever it was, I would find the cure and we would still make our new beginning. I'd come too far, risked everything, to give up hope now.

We reached the entrance to the cavern and I slowed our pace, remembering the destruction we'd caused with the explosives had left the trail all but completely blocked ahead of us. Trying to climb those rocks safely in the pitch dark would be a fool's game, and no doubt leave one or both of us with a broken ankle from a fall. And there was no way of knowing if my father's lair remained intact on the other side.

However, the only alternative was to enter the river and swim downstream.

And if that way was blocked as well?

Indecision brought me to a halt. I couldn't see ten feet ahead of us. How was I supposed to navigate through tons of rock, let alone find a book amid all the rubble?

I couldn't. I took a deep breath to calm myself. Think logically, not emotionally. Something my father used to say, and for once I was glad to hear his voice in my head. My actions needed to be rational, analytical. Calmer, I reconsidered my plan.

Finding the book in the dark? Impossible. Escaping up the coast with no food or money? A fool's journey. Returning to Innsmouth? Certain death. What did that leave?

The library.

Yes! I'd already considered it an option for having the book of spells translated. But hadn't Professor Gardiner mentioned there were other books of dark magic in Miskatonic's possession? Surely one of them would hold the answer I sought. And if not, I'd keep looking until I found one that did. All we had to do was make our way to Old Innsmouth, where no one would dare look—

"Henry." Flora's voice made me jump; she'd been so quiet up until then.

"Yes, my love? Don't worry, we aren't staying here. We're going to—"

"Someone is coming."

Damn. Already? I held my breath and listened. Nothing reached me except the sounds of the river.

"Are you sure?" I whispered. "The mind plays tricks down here." Perhaps she'd only heard her own heart, or a humming in her ears.

"Several men are approaching. I can smell— Oh." Flora's hand gripped mine painfully tight, distracting me as I tried to focus on her words. Had she said smell? That couldn't be. I'd heard wrong. More likely that—

A flash of light pierced the darkness. And then another. Back the way we'd come. The tunnel! But how had they arrived so quickly?

Flannery. It had to be him. No one else knew the route well enough. Seconds later, his booming voice confirmed it.

"Gilman? Are you down here? Give yourself up and we'll go easy on you. You have my word. This is your only chance, though."

Judging from the number of lights, he'd marshaled the entire damned precinct. And they'd all be armed. I had my pistol, but six bullets versus an army didn't leave me with good odds, even if I took cover and ambushed them.

"Henry." Ben Olmstead's voice this time. He must have taken Callie to the police station and Flannery immediately rallied the troops. My damned Gilman luck again. "Just give us Flora. They don't want you."

"Never!" The shout left me before I had a chance to consider what I was doing. All the lights instantly turned my way. Despite the distance between us, the illumination was enough for me to see that we were trapped. There'd be no climbing the mountain of stone behind us, and unless we wanted to try a suicide leap into the river and the beast that waited there, only one chance of escape seemed possible. Plead my case and hope that Flannery showed mercy on us or that the creature in the river awoke and attacked the approaching men.

How bitter a pill for me to swallow, that my only option for survival lay in the tentacles of the very monster I'd set out to destroy.

But who should I focus my efforts on? Ben, who'd already lied to me? Or the inspector himself, and hope that I'd earned enough goodwill with him that he'd overlook the murder of an innocent civilian? Neither seemed likely to believe me. Ben wanted Flora dead, and Flannery had as much as admitted I'd be arrested.

Perhaps if I could convince them Flora had a disease, a madness, that I could cure her…yes! That was it. A long shot at best, but I was desperate enough to try anything, to postpone the inevitable and pray for a miracle.

By then, the approaching mob had drawn near enough for me to make out individual shapes behind the bobbing lanterns and bright electric torches. Flannery, his massive bulk unmistakable despite the shadows, walked ahead of his men. An equally large man strode with him. Ben Olmstead.

When they were twenty feet away, the group came to a halt. Several

of them had weapons in hand. Flannery and Ben continued on, until they halved the distance between us.

"She didn't mean it," I said. "She's not fully recovered yet. She just needs some help. I can fix her. Ben, you saw her. She's not like the others. She's human, as human as you or I."

"She killed a man, Gilman," replied Flannery. His gruff voice held a note of compassion, which gave me some hope. On the other hand, Ben's next words carried no emotion other than fury.

"And nearly killed Callie."

"But she didn't."

"No thanks to you, or that monster you created."

A low growl sounded to my right. Flora. I reached out to take her hand but she pulled away. In the light of the torches, she looked once again a corpse, deathly pale and eyes sunken into two bottomless wells. I gave a silent curse. She'd earn no points with Flannery or his men looking like that. I had to change their minds, and quickly, before some fool got spooked and fired his gun.

"She's not a monster. We've seen real monsters. In Innsmouth and down here," I reminded them. "Creatures from the stars, demons hiding within human shells. Flora is none of those. Put her in a hospital if you must, and let me finish what I've started. Think about what that would mean. The illnesses I could cure."

"You're a bloody lunatic, Henry." Ben shook his fist, and his light trembled. "If you think anyone will let that abomination live another day, you'd best think again."

Flora leaped forward with a feral howl. Moving faster than any of us expected, she threw herself onto Ben with a mad fury. Even though he was more than twice her size, the violence of her attack sent him to the ground. His light rolled away and his screams joined her animal snarls as they fought. Flannery pulled his gun and tried to aim. I rushed toward them, calling for Flora to stop.

Ben's shouts changed to cries of pain. She had her hands on his neck and her face buried against his shoulder. I remembered the corpse in the alley, his throat torn away.

"No!" I grabbed Flora's arms and pulled with all my strength. She didn't budge, her muscles hard as stone and her teeth locked into Ben's flesh in the manner of a savage dog.

Someone kicked me in the side and I fell, the bruises and aches of my previous struggles waking up again as I gasped for air. I attempted to get to my knees but a heavy foot came down on my back, pinning me in place.

A gun went off. I craned my neck to see Flannery standing over Flora. He fired again. Flora's body twitched but she still held on. Flannery pulled the trigger twice more, the reports dull to my now-deafened ears.

Flora bucked and twisted. Blood flew from her mouth and she fell onto her back.

"Flora." I may have shouted or just whispered; my lungs ached and my ears rang too much to tell. The weight holding me in place released and I crawled to her, sobs racking my chest.

"Flora." This time I know I spoke in hushed tones as I ran my hands through her sodden hair. Dark stains covered her chest. I put my head down to listen for a breath and she opened her eyes.

"Henry." I had to strain to hear her. "It hurts, my love. It hurts so much."

Her voice trailed off, leaving me with two final words.

"The…anger."

One of her fingers touched my arm and then her hand fell away. Even in the murky, wavering light of the torches I saw the glaze of death come across her eyes.

"Damn you, Flannery." I stood up and shoved him. "Look at her. All of you. Look at her. She's not like those others. She was human."

Flannery shook his head. "Aye, she was. But that makes her even more of a monster, don't it?"

Something inside me snapped at his words. I charged him blindly, my fists swinging, a primitive growl tearing from my throat. I would kill him for—

He stepped aside and clubbed me with his pistol. The blow caught the side of my head and staggered me. A gun went off and hot fire burned my arm. Agony carved across my ribs and then the instinct to survive took hold. I turned and ran, hunched over like a common thief. More gunfire. Angry wasps flew past my ears. A hammer strike in my leg sent me to my knees.

Only there was no ground to stop me.

I tumbled off the edge into space, with no idea if I was heading toward water or rocks. Wind rushed past my ears, drowning out all other noises.

I tried to lift my arms, protect myself, but everything happened too fast.

I struck face-first, flat on my belly.

The impact drove the breath from my lungs and white stars filled my vision. Every part of my body cried out, skin and bones screaming as if beaten with red-hot pokers. And then icy cold enveloped me, washing away the hurt, numbing it. The frigid waters of the river soothed me and at the same time siphoned my energy away, leaving me helpless and limp.

My head bobbed to the surface and I coughed bitter water. I heard voices, saw lights, before I sank once more. My body drifted, then stopped, blocked by a hard, rough surface. I clung to it with the last dregs of my strength and lifted my face above the water to suck in welcome air.

"—can't see a damned thing," a distant voice said.

"I put at least two into him." This one familiar. Flannery? "If he ain't dead, he soon will be. Let him sink. Good riddance. Crazy bastard's food for the fish now. Just like his father."

"What about—"

I lost the rest as my tenuous hold gave way and I slipped down again. I felt as much as heard a heavy splash near me and I clawed my way back to the surface.

"—spend eternity together, just like they wanted."

Water seeped into my mouth and I tried to keep my head up but my limbs refused to work. My fingers, frozen and weak, relaxed their grip and I slid down, once more at the mercy of the currents. A deep ache awoke in my leg and another in my side. Icy talons dug into me, gripping my lungs and heart and squeezing tight.

A gray shape drifted past, spinning slowly in the currents. Flora. Her bone-white face stared at me from scant inches away, a reminder that I'd failed her not once, but three times.

"I'm sorry," I said, as she disappeared into the eternal dark. Water poured into my mouth and lungs, but I no longer cared. I didn't even struggle. A heavy lassitude gripped me in frigid arms and I gave in. This was it. The end. I was going to die just as my father had, adrift in an unnamed river until I reached the bottom or came to rest atop the body of the terrible star beast that lay at the root of all my troubles.

No, not her. Him. My father's face appeared in my mind, his sardonic lips twisted up in a supercilious grin.

He was the cause, just as I'd always known. And in the end his insanity

infected me. I tried to stop him but instead I became him. A desperate man ruining his life to bring back the woman he loved. How ironic. Flannery was right all along, the crazy apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

My descent came to a stop. Numb, barely conscious, I didn't feel the bottom of the river but I sensed the lack of motion.

Faces appeared before me. My mother, still alive and happy, ready to serenade me with a bedtime song or take me on long walks through the park. Ben, his eyes alight with mischief above his thick beard. My best friend despite our differences, and I wished things had ended differently for us. Scott, quiet yet confident, the bard to Ben's ruffian. Sometimes we'd get together without the others, just to sip brandy and enjoy a game of chess. Two men of higher class enjoying an evening the way true gentlemen should. Our secret, even to the grave. Callie, her delicate features the opposite of her brother's, a china doll whose strength lay hidden on the inside. So beautiful, and I cherished our time together despite my later rejections of her advances.

Flora. The one true love of my life, and too late I'd found out I was hers. How I would miss her laughter, the way she'd whisper a ribald joke to us so that none of the other patrons could hear her indecorous humor, how she'd touch my hand as she delivered a beer. And outside of work, when the four or five of us would go on picnics, attend shows if we had the money, or simply walk along the river. If only I'd taken her from the hospital and left town when I had the chance. We could have gone far enough away to live long and happy lives before my father's world domination came to be.

But I'd had to play the hero. And—

A sharp sting broke through my fading consciousness. My leg, where I'd been shot. Another in my arm. Then more of them, uncomfortable enough that I opened my eyes.

And beheld the face of my nightmares.

The mother-creature's massive, alien eyes stared at me from only a few yards away. Several of her tentacles held me in a loathsome embrace. The hellish scene illuminated by hundreds of tiny glowing lights that darted back and forth. One of them came to a halt in front of me: a miniature demon, a squid-thing with the arms and legs of a man, eight eel-like appendages, and skin that shined with a vile yellow luminescence.

It moved closer and stared at me.

With my father's altered, inhuman face.

Something pierced my chest and filled my veins with acid. The red-hot fire spread throughout my body as if hell itself had opened inside me. I screamed for release, my cries trapped in my head because water filled my lungs. The agony intensified, expanded, devoured me, until finally the gods bestowed their mercy.

They let me die.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Death was not what I expected.

Instead of eternal darkness or the pearly gates of heaven, I found myself in my childhood bedroom, tucked under my linens, my mother standing over me. She favored me with a familiar half smile, the one that always let me know she found humor in something I'd done.

"Mother." She was deceased; she'd crossed that divide many years ago. I knew that. Just as I knew my own miserable life and unfair death…and yet, here I was. A boy again. What kind of afterlife was this? Were the mystics of India correct after all with their talk of reincarnation?

Did that mean I was doomed to repeat my cursed existence all over again?

"Henry! For goodness' sake. What have you got there?" She reached down and retrieved a book from beneath my pillow.

Embarrassment warmed my cheeks. I remembered this particular event well. I'd tucked my schoolbooks under there hoping the knowledge within them might pass to my head while I slept.

"Maybe it will help me learn," I said. Even to my young ears, it sounded silly. My older self, more observant, noticed my mother's struggle to control her laughter.

"Did it work?" she asked. I frowned. There didn't seem to be anything new in my brain. What lessons had I been trying to conquer back then?

"Of course not." My father strode into the room, young and virile and not yet consumed by a fatal desire to play God. "You can't expect ink to pass through paper, pillow, and skull with information intact. It must be a direct line."

He sat down on the edge of my bed.

"No, you died. I killed you, in the cavern." I tried to back away but my child-body ignored me. The same way my parents paid no attention to my words.

My father took a long syringe from his jacket pocket and held it up.

Thick black liquid filled the glass tube.

"This," he said, wiggling the syringe, "is how to learn."

He plunged the needle into my chest. Pain filled my body and my body went rigid. I cried out, and again no one paid me any heed. My father emptied the dark fluid into me and then drew back. A single drop of red blood decorated the tip of the shiny steel needle.

"It hurts, but so does anything worth doing. You're young and healthy. You'll come around much faster than I did."

"Make it stop!" The words echoed in my skull but my mouth couldn't move.

"Now you will know," my mother said. Another voice echoed her, a deep, resonant rumble that shook the bed. "Now you will know."

I tried to move but my body remained paralyzed. My parents stood and joined hands. My vision played tricks on me; for a moment I saw multiple arms on both of them and gray shadows hovering around their bodies. Their eyes turned yellow. Their shapes melted together, grew larger.

Then I was alone.

Pitch black surrounded me. I drifted in perpetual night, with no concept of up or down, no sense of time passing. Tiny lights appeared, pinpricks of dazzling yellow all around me. Stars? Had I risen to the heavens?

Strange words filled my head, in languages I didn't recognize. Aldebaran, Fomalhaut, Nyil-yath Rho, Ptharg, Rigel. As each one appeared in my mind, one of the yellow lights brightened momentarily.

Thoughts came to me as well. Some of them long and detailed, like school lessons or reading passages. Others short, in the manner of snippets of conversation overheard in a crowded room. I tried to concentrate on them but they disappeared too fast, leaving weird sensations in their wake, as when you can almost but not quite remember something important.

The lights swirled faster around me, faster, became a dervish of glowing sparks, sucking more and more of the points into itself. After a moment, I joined them, an unfelt force lifting me ever so gently toward some destination I could not see.

Up I went, my body weightless, my mind awhirl.

Up.

Up….

★ ★ ★

I broke the surface and found myself in a different world than the one I'd left.

The water no longer seemed chill, but refreshing. To either side the banks of the river were clearly visible, narrow muddy flats that quickly gave way to vertical walls stretching up. Far above them, the cavern's ceiling was a dim gray dome with gigantic wounds in it from the explosions we'd initiated. A flash of light caught my eye and I looked down.

I floated in a sea of dancing stars.

The sparks of yellow had followed me from my dream – or was it a hallucination? A glimpse of the afterlife? – into the real world. Hundreds of them darted and danced around me. Only now I saw them for what they truly were. My father's children.

My brothers and sisters.

I gathered one in my cupped hands and held it up. Although its mouth didn't move and no expression showed on its miniature face, I sensed approval from it, an acceptance of us as family. Its extra appendages twirled and swayed with an unearthly grace.

As did my own.

From my back, just above my waist, sprouted two new extremities, each several feet long and powerfully muscled. I flexed one and it responded instantly, whipping through the water and stretching to three times its length before returning to its previous size.

I returned my half brother to the water and in the glow of my new family I inspected the rest of my body. My hands remained mostly normal, except for a lengthening of the fingers and the short, black claws that had replaced my nails. My feet had grown long and wide, with webbing that made swimming an ease.

A few kicks brought me to shore. I climbed out of the water and shed the tattered remains of my clothes. My tentacles retracted to about the length of my forearm, ready should I need them but small enough to hide beneath clothing. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the briny sea air. Until that moment, I hadn't even realized I'd been breathing while submerged. I touched fingers to my neck, felt the slits of gills.

Mother did this. Even without all the knowledge she'd passed on to me, I'd have known the truth. Just as my father before me, I'd been saved, made not just whole again but better than before. Healed, changed.

I'd become a child of the stars.

'Fhalma.

Mother, in her own tongue. The tongue of the ancients, the gods. Not her name, but her title.

She'd bestowed a magical gift upon me, but I had no way to thank her.

She was gone, well and truly dead this time. I knew that right away. She'd sacrificed herself, expended the last of her essence to ensure my survival. But she still existed in the metaphysical sense, would live on forever in me and her other children. The ones sired by my father.

And all the ones I would one day bring forth into the world.

Thinking of Father reminded me of his failed attempt to initiate the subjugation of the human race. I saw his plans so clearly now, his grand strategy to complete Mother's mission here on Earth. And I understood where he went wrong. For now I also knew Mother's purpose on our planet. It wasn't just to enslave mankind and build a home for a new race of beings, as my father had stated.

It was to prepare the world for the true gods, the ones that had dispatched Mother and other emissaries out into the universe.

The reasons for his error were gone forever, rotting away with the rest of him in the silt at the bottom of the river. But I could hazard a guess or two. Perhaps his injuries had been worse than mine, and his brain not quite able to handle all the changes and information Mother's life force wrought.

Upon reflection, though, more likely his essential makeup, that narcissistic component of his being that influenced all his decisions throughout life and made him unable to imagine anyone his equal, remained a part of him even after his rebirth. Rather than pave the way for the coming of the Elders and serving as the key to their eventual gateway, he thought to create his own kingdom and rule over it as a god himself.

In that, he was mistaken. Just as when he thought to cure my birth mother by replacing her infected parts with those of corpses. Attempting to create an army of the undead held no chance of success. The disappearance of so many people, the inherent problems of keeping rotting corpses animated…foolish.

But an army of demons?

I knelt by the water and dipped my hand in. Dozens of my brethren approached, reaching out to brush their tentacles across my fingers. They were young, barely hatchlings, my little brothers and sisters. They would need time to grow. Which they would, especially once they made their

way out to the sea. Not quickly, more on the scale of a man or dolphin. But one day they would be mature enough to breed, and they would need to find mates.

As would I.

"Learn from your mistakes, Henry," my father used to tell me. And so I would. His, and mine. Like him, I had been tasked with creating a new race. But I would do it the way Mother had intended and not let my own hubris detract me from the ultimate goal. My actions would deliver me a kingdom, yes, but that would only be the first step in the reshaping of the world. I would be both ruler and an agent of the future. A placeholder for the true king and queen.

I slipped into the water and my siblings crowded around me.

"Follow the river," I told them. "Go to the sea and partake of the bounty it provides. When the time is right, rejoin me."

Their acknowledgements reached me as a comforting *hummmm* I felt as much as heard. They dispersed, save for a few that remained to accompany me on my journey to the twin rivers of the surface world. Those chosen ones would subsist on fish and the occasional unlucky swimmer, and they would eventually become the guardians of my underground realm.

I dove, my powerful legs pushing me forward and down in an instant. The change from breathing air to water was instantaneous and required no thought on my part. My eyesight adjusted as well. Rocks and other obstacles were dark gray against a gray background, like a photograph. My siblings provided more than enough light for my improved vision. We swam against the current, me using mighty kicks of my webbed feet, the little ones undulating their bodies like squid to easily keep pace with me.

As I swam, I tried to make sense of the incredible library of knowledge Mother had transferred to me. Some of it, such as her reasons for traveling to Earth and the basics of my altered biology, were crystal clear. But large portions remained elusive, shadows behind gossamer curtains.

I felt like a primitive man who'd wandered into an ancient library where too many of the tomes were written in languages I didn't yet understand. Others were filled with unpronounceable words and mystifying scientific explanations far beyond my comprehension.

Whenever I tried to concentrate on them, my head began to ache. In time, a voice within me whispered. Father's? Mother's? Some queer

combination of all three of us? It is all part of the transformation, which will not come easily or quickly.

Although it was not in my nature to be patient, I accepted the need to wait, to trust that as I continued to evolve into whatever Mother had in store for me, the curtains would open, the words become clear, and my comprehension would grow apace.

For now, though, my grasp of the advanced sciences and magic her race routinely utilized remained frustratingly vague. For instance, I knew she'd come from a planet orbiting a star so far away that even on the clearest of nights I wouldn't be able to see it. A planet where fantastical behemoths warred with each other and their neighboring star systems for millennia.

I saw that this wasn't the first time her kind had tried to settle on Earth and that I would need to tread carefully lest all be for naught again. Despite the great powers of Mother and her kin, and the knowledge they wielded, they'd still failed in their initial attempt, unprepared for the tenacity of humankind and the internecine squabbles that had reduced their numbers to just a handful.

There were other images as well. Another of her kind dormant below a glacier of ice and snow in a land far away. An ancient city, its inhabitants long gone, buried at the bottom of a tropical sea, guarded by a mindless, ravenous beast. Pyramids, similar to those of Egypt, but hidden in perpetual shadow on a rocky plain that looked like nothing on Earth.

Queer sensations accompanied these visions, a muted vibration within my chest, almost a tugging. I felt I could follow it, the way a homing pigeon follows a path to its nest. One particular impression seemed close by. Arkham? Miskatonic? I received no picture to go with it, but it seemed I was traveling in the right direction.

Whatever it was, it would need to wait. I had more important business to attend to.

Starting with Ben Olmstead.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I emerged from the Manuxet River in the wee hours of the morning. Fog shrouded the city so thoroughly it even hindered my new ability to see in the dark. For once I didn't curse the gloom, as it provided a necessary cloak for both my lack of clothes and my new form.

I followed the river's edge for a few blocks until I reached an area of tenements and warehouses near Fish Street. A good location to make my entry into the city, as a furtive, disheveled man would attract far less attention amidst the squalor than on a busy street.

Along the way I caught a few glimpses of myself in empty windows. Like my father before me, although not to as great a degree, I'd taken on a decidedly amphibious countenance, my mouth wider, my teeth sharper, than any human. Some of my original nose still remained, not yet devolved into fleshy slits. My hair had disappeared, leaving my pate a pale dome.

The changes didn't disturb me. Rather, I felt proud of what I'd become and eager to see what further transformations might occur, physically and metaphysically.

It took only a few minutes to locate what I needed: a pair of drunken fellows lurching down a side street.

"Evening," I said, stepping from the shadows. One of them gave me a bleary-eyed examination while the other hung onto his friend's shoulder and mumbled something obscene.

"Here, now," the more upright of the two slurred. "Get yer sorry arse out of here. We've no coin to spare for no damn Mary."

"It's not your coin I want," I said. Faster than the eye could follow, I grabbed them by the necks with my tentacles. Bones snapped and they went limp in my grasp without a sound.

I hurried to strip them before someone else came along. Neither was quite my size, but between them I was able to dress myself well enough to pass muster, at least in the fog. A quick examination of the bodies showed that my attack had left incriminating circular bruises on their throats. If

Flannery were to hear of it, he'd no doubt set every cop in Innsmouth searching for me, above and below ground. I couldn't risk dragging them back to the river, so I did the next best thing. I found a sewer and dropped them down. With any luck, the stench of their decomposing flesh would blend into the general miasma of the neighborhood until the next good rain washed them away.

Dressed and having warned myself to be more careful when involved in physical confrontations, I made my way through alleys and side streets to Ben Olmstead's apartment. It was my fervent desire to find him sleeping off his exertions, hopefully with Callie there as well so he could keep watch over her. That would allow me to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak.

The omnipresent fog no longer seemed treacherous; rather, it aided my passage from one street to the next as I crossed the waterfront district. I had no fear of dangers waiting in the mists. I was the danger now, and woe to anyone who encountered me. Still, prudence kept me from making my presence known.

A gnawing hunger in my belly reminded me I hadn't eaten in more than a day, not since before Ben and Callie discovered Flora in my house.

Just thinking about my beloved's death brought my rage to a boil again. First I would deal with Ben Olmstead. Then I would assuage the emptiness in my belly. Perhaps with pieces of my old friend's steaming, bloody flesh….

I'm coming for you, old sport. You will grovel before me, and your sister will be mine as well.

I reached Ben's apartment and tried the door. Locked, as I'd expected. No matter. If he thought a door could protect him, he was sadly mistaken. I gripped the knob with a tentacle and squeezed until the metal gave way with a loud *crack*. Then I shouldered the door open.

Alert for any movement, I entered the apartment. I'd made enough noise to rouse the soundest sleeper from their dreams. If Ben were there, he'd by now be readying himself to fight off a burglar. He owned a gun and wouldn't be afraid to use it. I had no idea if I could survive a bullet to the heart or head. My physical changes were vast, but my father's death – and that of Mother – were powerful reminders of my own lack of immortality. Someday, perhaps. But until then, I must be careful.

Pausing in the sitting room, I breathed deep, considering the flavors in

the air. Hints of food and cologne, and traces of perfume as well. Callie's? It seemed they were both here. Upstairs, perhaps? Hiding?

Waiting.

A trap? Logic told me it most likely was. I pictured Ben in his bedroom chair, or perhaps standing in front of the bed, pistol aimed at the door, Callie cowering behind him. The moment I entered the room, he'd pull the trigger. Even if I came at him full speed there was a good chance he'd get off several shots before I could take him down.

And yet I fully intended to take the risk. Justice required that I avenge Flora's death. I couldn't allow Ben to see the morning sun. And once I had Callie in my possession, I could retreat to the underground river and find a new place to hide, one where Flannery and his goons would never locate me. There I would bide my time while my consolation prize birthed my future army.

Despite the lust for revenge boiling inside me, I retained enough common sense to press myself against one wall as I climbed the stairs and approached Ben's chambers. Flickering yellow light seeped out from under the door, confirming my worst fears. He waited, roused by my entry.

For the moment, I remained out of his line of fire should he decide to shoot through the door. However, in order to enter the room I'd have no choice but to expose myself.

Bullets hadn't been enough to end my father's life; I had to hope the same held true for me. Using my new strength and speed, I threw the door open and leaped through. I landed almost halfway across the room, my tentacles raised to attack my sworn enemy, my body tense with the anticipation of the pistol's roar and the impact of a bullet, a pain I remembered all too well from being shot in the cavern.

Nothing happened. No explosion of noise, no hammering blow to my chest.

The room was empty.

"You came."

The soft whisper from the bed alerted me to my error. Callie lay there, mushroom-pale beneath a single sheet. Dark smudges perched under her eyes that had nothing to do with the shadows cast by the single lamp burning on the dresser. She stared at me and I saw no horror in her gaze, despite how monstrous I must look to her.

"You sound as if you've been expecting me," I said.

She gave me a tired smile. My entrance had woken her from a deep sleep, and I wondered if she'd also partaken of alcohol or laudanum for her injuries. I approached the bed and still she didn't shrink away, despite the shocking changes to my appearance.

"Not expecting, praying. For days and nights," she replied. "So many that I feared you might have perished in that cave."

I paused. This was not going as I'd imagined. Days and nights? She made it sound as if—

Callie sat up and pushed the sheet to her waist, exposing her nightdress and ample bosom. She gestured for me to come forward.

"Hurry, we haven't much time before he returns."

He? She had to mean Ben. He wasn't home, then. No matter. As much as I'd come to avenge my beloved's murder – and the attempt to end my own life – the most important thing was to begin the creation of the new race. I wouldn't fall victim to my father's foibles, let my personal desires get in the way of the master plan.

Callie would be mine. I had wanted Ben there to witness my capture of his sister, but instead I'd have to settle for a different type of revenge. I would leave here with Callie and let my bastard ex-friend suffer a lifetime of guilt and sorrow, never knowing if she lived or died at my hands.

"Come, Henry. Claim what is yours." She ran pale hands down her chest, unbuttoning her nightdress. Her words and gestures made no sense to me; she acted as if I'd shown up for an illicit rendezvous with a secret lover, as if she'd been awaiting my embrace. Her eyes glittered with ardor from within their dark, sunken cavities.

Surely she must be feverish! Perhaps she didn't even see the real me before her, but rather some vision of my past self. I thought back to Flora's rapid descent into illness after her injury. Did Callie suffer the same poisoning of her blood?

Despite my thoughts, I found my eyes drawn to her body, enticingly exposed to me from the waist up. She'd always been properly chaste when we'd dated; we'd never done more than kiss goodnight, hold hands, and briefly hug each other. Yet there'd always been a physical attraction between us. Even now, I remembered the feel of her breasts against my chest, soft and enticing, like two perfumed pillows.

In many ways, she and Flora had been exact opposites. Flora outgoing and unafraid to buck convention by speaking her mind or exposing more

flesh than appropriate if it meant putting extra tips in her pocket. Small in stature but big in presence, her fiery personality lit up a room.

Callie was more voluptuous, needing no corset to present an hourglass figure, one she kept politely covered at all times. Her demeanor matched her style of dress, elegant and civil, a true woman of society. In that respect, they were both the opposites of their brothers, with Scott always acting the true gentleman and Ben a solid working-class fellow.

For the longest time, I'd imagined that one day Scott and Callie would finally realize their many similarities and take their friendship to the next level. Only Scott never seemed interested in Callie or any other woman, and Callie never extinguished the torch she carried for me.

Now she would get her wish, although not in the manner she or her brother had dreamed.

I climbed into her bed, my very human lust rising as she slid the gown from her shoulders, revealing her body to me for the first time. Delusional she might be, but she showed no confusion or hesitation as she reached for me. My hands shook with anticipation as I loosened my trousers and positioned myself over her. One of my appendages caressed her neck, ready to deliver the injection that would enable my seed to flourish within her womb. She moaned and closed her eyes, giving herself over to me.

A thunderous explosion filled the room and a painful blow struck my shoulder, knocking me off the bed. I hit the floor hard and rolled to my knees.

"Die, you fiend!" a familiar voice shouted. Ben Olmstead.

He fired again, the report deafening in the small space. A piece of wall shattered next to my head. My injured arm refused to work but I managed to lash out with my tentacles. One of them struck him across the chest and he stumbled into the hallway. I followed, leaping from side to side to throw off his aim. He was just raising the gun again when I reached him.

His eyes grew wide as he got his first look at my face. I laughed. He couldn't have expected this new version of me. After all, the monsters were supposed to be dead. Mother, my father, Flora. And I'd been human when they watched me fall into the river.

"Hello, Ben. Surprised to see me?"

Instead of firing again, he backed away, too stunned by my monstrous appearance to do the sensible thing and pull the trigger. Or run.

"H…H…Henry?"

I grasped his arm with one of my octopoidal limbs. He winced as the rubbery appendage gripped him with bruising force and the gun fell from his hand.

"You're supposed to be dead!" His face was pale behind his orange beard; his freckles stood out like ink dots on paper.

"Indeed. At your hand, and Flannery's. But as you can see, I'm very much alive." I raised my arms and then winced as a stabbing pain ran through my injured shoulder.

"How…?" He glanced at the tentacle holding him and then back at my face. I saw in his eyes the same questions I'd had for my father that night in the caverns.

"Fate had something in mind for me other than death. I fear you won't be so fortunate." I gripped him tighter, relishing the girlish whimper that slipped through his clenched teeth. He dropped to his knees, clawing futilely at impenetrable skin with his free hand. I increased the pressure, was rewarded with the brittle *crack!* of his wrist breaking. He screamed and tears ran down his cheeks.

"How does it feel, old chum? That's but a fraction of the pain you inflicted upon me." I wrapped his fingers in a coil and squeezed. *Snap!* He gasped and moaned. "No physical pain comes close to the agony of watching the woman you love die in your arms. Or the soul-wrenching ache of being betrayed by your best friend, shot and left to die like a mongrel dog. No, you will never know that kind of suffering. But you will know pain. That I assure you. I will tear your body apart limb by limb, organ by organ. First, though, I have something else to take care of."

I released him and he fell onto his side, clutching his wounded arm.

"How fitting that we end up this way, Ben Olmstead. A bride for a bride, a life for a life."

"No…not Callie…please…" His words came out weak and breathless as he comprehended my meaning. I laughed and turned away, eager to consummate my desires while he watched, helpless in his pain and terror.

The thud of heavy footsteps alerted me to my mistake. The narrow confines of the hallway hindered my ability to meet Ben's attack and he rammed me like a bull, dodging under my tentacles and putting his shoulder into my ribs. We fell into the bedroom and before I could rise a sharp pain blossomed in my back. I tried to rise and my left leg gave out.

Stabbed! I'd forgotten that Ben always carried a small knife, a pearl-

handled blade left to him by his father. That blade now resided just above my hip. I reached for it and Ben kicked me, his heavy boot finding my stomach and rolling me over. The knife jabbed me again and fire raced down my leg, immobilizing me.

His injured arm hanging useless, Ben stood over me, pistol gripped in his good hand and aimed at my face.

"I don't know what sorcery befouled you, but I'll not let you contaminate my sister or any other person. This time you join your father for sure, Henry Gilman."

I tried to lash out with my tentacles but they were trapped under me. Ben smiled, knowing he had me just where he wanted me.

A flash of movement behind him and the dull clang of metal meeting skull. His eyes rolled back and he fell to the ground.

Callie stood there, a chamber pot in her hands.

"My lord," she said, dropping to her knees before me. She took my hand in hers and bowed her head. I tried to speak, but I had no words. She lifted her gaze and I saw something more than adoration in her eyes.

Worship.

"There is much I have to tell you."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"I tried many times to speak with you, but you kept refusing me."

Her words should have carried the sting of bitterness but I heard nothing but simple statement of fact. Either she hid her feelings well or she truly harbored no ill will for my past actions.

"My mind was elsewhere," I said. Not an apology. I could never apologize for placing Flora's welfare above all else. Indicating my bandages, I added, "You have a captive audience now. What is it you need to say?"

I had many questions for her as well, but I held my tongue. She'd already piqued my curiosity with her comments and her actions. Her lack of surprise at my appearance. Her undisguised desire for carnal relations.

Calling me 'my lord.'

Where had that come from? And she'd nearly killed her own brother to save what would appear to anyone as one of Satan's guardians. Things were not as they seemed with Callie Olmstead, and caution lent me patience to find out why.

She glanced at Ben, who lay on the floor, a pool of blood beneath his head. He still breathed, although shallow and erratic. I suspected it would be a long while before he woke, if at all.

"I feared this day would never come, that my brother had truly killed you in that cavern. Twenty nights I have waited, my hopes dwindling with each new dawn."

"Twenty nights?" How could that be possible? I'd thought my transformation had only taken hours, a day at the most. But then, my father's had lasted even longer.

She ignored my question. "I tried not to lose faith in you. I told them you were strong, that if anyone could reach the goddess it would be you."

Callie tied off my bandage and seated herself in a chair across from me. She'd donned her nightdress and buttoned it, although it still offered

little in the way of decency. The lack of decorum bothered her not in the least as she leaned forward and spoke with an intensity that held me rapt even though her words created more questions in me than they answered.

"Eons ago, in the first time of man, the heralds of the Elder Gods crossed the great expanses of space and came to Earth."

"I'm well aware," I said, motioning with my tentacles. I quickly told her of my encounter with Mother in the depths of the river, and the subsequent passing of her knowledge to me. "They came from Aldebaran, a planet so far from here we've never seen its sun in our sky."

"And the goddess?

I informed her of Mother finally succumbing to her injuries. She bit her lip. "I feared it was so when you told us of the explosion. We've already begun to make new plans. Although your presence will force another change, one most definitely for the better."

"We? Who do you refer to?"

"The Followers. After the Great Wars, when most of the heralds left our planet or perished, the remaining Star Children went into hiding." She explained that a few human acolytes had remained, biding their time until the gods returned. As the centuries passed, they continued to worship in secrecy, handing down their knowledge from generation to generation.

"Our numbers are small, and we remain scattered so as not to draw attention."

"And who do you worship, Callie Olmstead?" I remembered her brooch, the same one worn by many at Miskatonic, and I had a suspicion I knew the answer.

"The Dweller of the Deep," she said, confirming my guess. "Scythalla."

With that word, a million doors opened in my skull, spilling images and words and facts, only some of which made sense. A great war raging across the continents. Terrible weapons of light that carved alien flesh from bone and melted giant swatches of earth. Enormous flying machines that blazed like multicolored comets across the sky. Entire civilizations, some as advanced as the ancient Egyptians or the strange primitives in South America, wiped out in cataclysmic events.

Much like during my rebirth at the bottom of that river, it was too much for me to comprehend at once. But one colossal figure I

recognized, her tentacles burned and steaming, sinking to the bottom of the ocean off a rocky coast.

"'Fhalma," I whispered.

"The Great Mother," Callie said. "The Followers knew she had not perished. They, and their descendants, continued to search for her through the centuries, hoping to one day wake her and begin the Cycle of the Coming. Like so many others, I dreamed it would happen in my lifetime, but I never believed the prophesied one would be my own heart's desire."

"Descendants?" I glanced at Ben's prone form and then back at Callie. Had the Olmsteads been hiding some kind of familial secret from me all these years?

"Not me." She shook her head. "I wasn't lucky enough to trace my roots back to the original Followers. I knew nothing of the Great Ones before I came to Miskatonic."

She went on to tell me of her conversion, of meeting a man – Professor George Angell, the very same person she'd sent us to see – who had opened her eyes and her soul to the magic and wonders of 'Fhalma and her kind. Along the way, he'd also partaken of her in ways both foul and arcane. Had I known of this when I was but a human, I'd have been furious at his treatment of her and avenged her honor.

Now, I understood the necessity of it. He was preparing her body and soul to be a vessel for something no ordinary human could survive.

"As an acolyte, I pledged my life to Scythalla, even as I pretended to live among ordinary people. When the professor discovered the ancient city of Celephaïs, we thought it might provide new information that would help us locate our goddess or her kin. We had no idea your father had already awoken her. Not until you confided in my brother. I tried to speak to you privately, but…."

"Better that you didn't. I'd have thought you mad. Or worse, in league with the very demons I sought to destroy."

Indeed, things would have been very different had Callie informed me of all she knew. It would have pitted Flannery and me against her and her Followers, quite possibly with their side victorious and my father still alive. Alive and determined to put himself on the throne of the world.

No, better I carry out Mother's vision in the proper manner.

Unlike Silas Gilman, I knew my place in the grand plan. To waken the sleeping giant slumbering beneath the Antarctic ice. Asgotha, brother of

Scythalla. He would take her place and open the gates so that the Elders – Ghatanothoa, Ythogtha, Zoth-Ommog; I knew their names now – could finally cross the great expanse to our world.

But where did Callie and her Followers fit in all of this? Why had they focused their efforts on Innsmouth? I asked her as much.

"We have always maintained outposts in New England and certain other parts of the country, and the world. Places where ancient lore and writings hinted that Scythalla or one of her brethren might have gone to ground. A little more than fifty years ago, Professor Angell, then a young man just starting his career, heard a rumor that a fishing magnate named Marsh had made a deal with the devil to ensure good hauls for his ships."

"Marsh? Flora and Scott's grandsire?"

"The same. The professor rushed here from out west but before he arrived the town fell victim to a terrible sickness."

"The plague."

"That's the popular story. But in truth, it was much the same as what your father brought about. Dead men rising from their graves, creatures half-man, half-monster walking the streets at night. Professor Angell tried to locate Marsh so he could learn the whereabouts of Scythalla but the townspeople took up arms and put down all the half-breeds, and Marsh and his crew with them."

"Flora always said her grandfather died of the plague."

"That was the story told. Only a few knew the truth. Confident the great goddess had to be nearby, Angell obtained a position at Miskatonic and slowly gathered the brethren to the area. Innsmouth, Arkham, Bolton, Essex. Miskatonic became a center for our efforts because it maintains such a vast library of the arcane. Professor Angell has held firm to the belief that one day we would find the Great Mother, wake her, and bring forth the prophesied one, who would lead us into the new age."

"How many of you are there?"

"Dozens who are descendants of the old families, and more like me. Acolytes. Tomorrow we will go to the university and you will greet your subjects."

"Tomorrow? Why wait?" I was eager to take my rightful place as king. Had I known a legion of devotees already awaited me, I'd have forgone my desire for revenge and made Miskatonic my first stop.

"I will send messages tonight but it will take a day for all to gather. In

the meanwhile, we have something more important to attend to. It is my honor to become your First."

Callie stood, pulled her nightdress off her shoulders, and let it fall to the floor.

At the sight of her nakedness, my former ardor returned. She was not Flora, but that no longer mattered. I was a king, and I needed a queen to help me build a new society. Callie would be a perfect choice. Her mind was sharp and her body ripe and womanly; she would bear me many children and provide valuable counsel.

Yet something human still remained in me, causing me to question her true desire. Had it been anyone else standing there, I would have taken them, as was my right. But this was Callie, and she deserved more than to be an unwilling slave to my lust.

"You truly want me, even in my present form?"

She smiled and held her arms out. "I do. I always have. All that I endured, all that was done to me, was for this one purpose. To prepare me for the possibility of joining with the Chosen One. To have it be you makes it even more of an honor. I am truly blessed that the Ancient Ones have seen fit to not only select you as their emissary on Earth, but that you believe me worthy to be your mate. You have a choice, you know. Any of the Followers would kill to stand here before you."

"I need no other," I said, and I meant it. She smiled and stepped toward me, and my lust surged to greater heights than I'd ever known before.

I stripped off my clothes, revealing all the changes Mother had wrought in me, and the ones still continuing. My pallid skin and the webbing between fingers and toes. The cape-like wings that hadn't yet reached their full size, as my father's had. My tentacles, their mouths even now opening and closing in anticipation. I wrapped her in coils of rubbery flesh and pulled her close. That part of me that still remained a man found its proper place between her legs and I entered her while I pushed her onto the bed, still clenching her tight. She moaned, but not in pain. Her hands gripped my shoulders and she matched my movements, whispering my name over and over.

It had been far too long since I had been with a woman, and I felt myself reaching my apex of pleasure sooner than I anticipated. Aware of my duty even in the throes of my ardor, I positioned the tips of my appendages at the other available openings and thrust them inside her. Her

body writhed beneath me and she screamed, the sound muffled by the pseudopod occupying her throat. Her cries turned to choking as I loosed my seed, both alien and human, into her.

I held her immobile until I finished, and then released her. She coughed and lay back against the pillows, her smile one of satisfaction, although from completing her duty or a lingering pleasure, I could not say. I found myself hoping it was both.

Staring down at my new bride, her flesh pale and bruised, I wondered how much of my life had been beyond my control since the beginning. Had I always been destined to walk this path? Had Mother's influence been there from the start, her mere presence beneath the town serving as a tool to manipulate lives through the centuries?

No, I chided myself. For if that were so, Angell and his people would have had their eyes on my father, on me. They wouldn't have been taken by surprise by my resurrection as their king.

No doubt Fate spun a complex web with many different paths, and it was my own doing that set me down one of them. After all, hadn't it been my personal desire and stubbornness that sent me after my father that fortunate night?

We make our own destinies, I thought. And now it was time to make mine. One that would soon see me seated on the throne of a new world. A few days ago, I'd dreamed of being the hero of Innsmouth. Now I prepared to make the town, and one day the entire world, mine.

I stood and Callie's eyes went wide. Turning, I saw the reason for her alarm even as I heard her gasp.

Ben's body had disappeared.

"We should have killed him," she said. "Now he'll come for you, and he won't be alone."

"Let him." I wondered how long he'd been awake, listening to us from behind closed eyes.

"He's as stubborn as an old mule, you know that," Callie continued, consternation pulling her mouth tight. "He'll stop at nothing to find you."

"I'm counting on it," I said, knowing she spoke the truth. "Let him come. Let them all. I won't make the same mistakes as my father. We'll hide ourselves away until I have amassed an army that is unstoppable."

"My king," she whispered, her voice still raw. "It will be my honor to stand by your side."

Her words filled me with satisfaction. Truly, I had chosen well. It occurred to me that Fate's plan was even more complex than I imagined. For if what Callie had told me was true, then only the psychic and physical degradations she'd experienced at the hands of Professor Angell and the Followers had made it possible for her to mate with one such as I. Flora as a human would not have survived, and Flora as a changeling, no matter how human she seemed on the outside, would have been incapable of producing my progeny, that perfect melding of human and alien species that 'Fhalma's grand plan required.

That, in turn, caused me to ponder who my father had bred with in order to produce my siblings, the ones that even now I could sense, far out in the ocean, biding their time until they matured. Who had she been, and what had happened to her?

Ah, Fate! That cursed she-witch. So many pieces in motion, like some otherworldly chess master. Plans within devious plans, all to place me in the embrace of a dying god, each of us the other's last hope.

With my true path finally revealed, the way forward was clear to me, the curtains pulled away to reveal a straight line to the future. A visible road, yes, but one also still fraught with peril. Humankind would not submit easily; they'd shown in the past they possessed what it took to defeat Mother and her kind. My own stubbornness, and that of people such as Ben and Flannery, were examples of what we'd have to face. They would come after us, in groups small and large.

Let them, I thought. I will be ready for their pitchforks and torches, guns and knives. A queer sense of déjà vu came over me. They'd called my father Dr. Frankenstein upon a time.

Now I would be their monster.

But unlike Shelley's brute or my own sire, I would use my intelligence and prepare to meet my enemies. I knew their ways; hadn't I been the one to lead them into battle the last time? Flannery and his men got the best of me once, when I was merely human and paralyzed with grief.

I held my hand out to Callie and she took it.

"Come," I said. "I require food before we depart for the university. Dress for travel. And we must contact your people. Tell them to prepare for war."

Whoever came after us would come in force.

And I intended to be ready.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The fog-shrouded grounds of Miskatonic University welcomed me as we entered the campus proper. I breathed deeply, savoring the dampness, with its undertones of wet earth and brackish water from the river and nearby swamps.

Hints of movement in the grass caused me to look down. Small creatures hopped and crawled across the sidewalks and sod. At first glance they appeared to be ordinary frogs and toads, but then I noticed their larger than normal eyes and misshapen mouths. Dozens of the fist-sized amphibians joined us as we crossed the great lawn. Peculiar grunts and belches in the distance told me more of the mutant beasts were emerging from the waters in response to my presence.

As we walked, a peculiar sensation blossomed at the back of my skull. I'd felt it before, when I first left the cavern after my transformation. It was stronger now, and with it came an image. A cephalopodal creature, vaguely similar to my half brothers and sisters from my father's loins. As if in a waking dream, I saw that the creature lay trapped in some unnatural hibernation. Something descended from Mother? The image was too blurred for me to say for sure. It drew me, though, acting like a compass needle to guide me between the ancient buildings.

I increased my speed, forcing Callie to almost run in order to keep up. Another turn, and another.

There!

A three-story stone structure loomed over us. I recognized it immediately: the antiquities building, the same place Callie had sent Flannery and me in search of Professor Angell. I turned and confronted her.

"You knew when you sent us here that the professor was in Antarctica. So why did you do it?"

She answered without any trace of remorse for her actions. "For the book, of course. The moment you spoke of needing something

translated, I knew you had to have it. We were desperate to have it back so Professor Gardiner could translate the pictoglyphs on the monuments."

"Gardiner was one of the Followers?" He hadn't struck me as such, but then, I would never have expected Callie to be part of such a cabal. Neither of them had the sullen, evil disposition of Angell's secretary.

"Of course. Without the proper training and preparation, no one could possibly work among those ruins without going insane."

I remembered my own encounter with the queer writings on the stone blocks and columns, how they seemed to come alive and bring forth such intense feelings of doom and terror within me.

"We did not anticipate anyone coming to steal it again. Had we known the truth of your father at the time…. We thought it had been taken by a simple thief. The rumors of the Fish Street Strangler…we were waiting to see if they were true or just fanciful tales."

Her voice remained emotionless. I sensed no sadness for Gardiner's death, despite that he'd been one of her own. Truly, Callie Olmstead was cold as winter ice beneath her pleasant exterior. She'd fooled us all for so long.

I approached the door and waited while Callie produced a key. Inside, a hushed silence surrounded us. I breathed bitter mildew and dust, the sharp tang of old parchment and leather, the syrupy scent of dry, cracked bindings. The weight of centuries lay upon us, a physical thing. Tiny whispers caught my ears, the rustlings of insect and rodent feet inside the walls. It reminded me of my visits to the university library as a student, when I would marvel at the vast stores of knowledge hidden in the stacks.

Now I wondered what magical tomes waited for me there, treatises and grimoires filled with dark spells to aid me in my quest for domination. But they would have to remain mysteries for the time being, until after my current enemies had been slain.

The magnetic force pulling me along doubled in strength and shifted direction, tugging me forward and back equally. I stopped in the middle of the foyer and turned in a slow circle, trying to get a sense of where the source of the power that had captured me lay.

Not in this room, not ahead, but below us.

"The basement?" I asked, and Callie smiled.

"They are waiting for you there," she said. I didn't question where. Professor Angell's storeroom, of course.

We descended the staircase, Callie in the lead. Angell's dour secretary was nowhere in sight when we entered the office. At the door to Angell's inner sanctum, Callie stepped aside and nodded, indicating I should have the honor.

By then, the feeling in my head was an almost physical thing, urging me onward. *Hurry. Hurry!*

I pushed the door open and beheld the vast space once more, only this time there was none of the dread I'd experienced on my previous visit, only a vast, soul-encompassing feeling of coming home. Of belonging. The towering columns and megaliths doubled in my vision, 'Fhalma's memories overlaying my own. I saw the reconstructed ruins through my eyes and hers, as pieces of a puzzle only partly reassembled and as a massive city stretching on to the horizon, gigantic buildings and temples lining avenues paved in stone. Creatures of all shapes and sizes traveled those streets, many familiar to me from the carvings I'd seen, others so bizarre they seemed spawned from the nightmares of Satan himself.

Someone had placed lanterns throughout the room, and the wavering light emphasized the primeval atmosphere and the duality of the now and then merging in my brain.

The faint odor of mineral-laden water reached me from somewhere deep within the maze of monoliths. I'd smelled something similar when we crossed the Miskatonic River, but we had to be too far from its shores for it to be the source. Before I could question Callie, two people emerged from behind one of the stone blocks and knelt before us. One of them, a matronly woman with a grandmotherly mien, held a large glass jar filled with cloudy liquid. Movement deeper in the recesses of the storeroom told me more of the Followers lurked in the shadows between the columns.

I was instantly drawn to the vessel and knew it for the source of the peculiar sensation I'd been feeling. The two Followers bowed their heads at my approach. Ignoring them, I took the jar and beheld the wonder floating inside.

Its enlarged head was more amphibian than human, with bulging eyes and a wide slit for a mouth that ran from one circular ear hole to the other. Instead of a nose, it had parallel slits partially covered by flaps of skin. Its arms and legs were human but undersized, like those of a dwarf or midget. Four tentacles, very similar to my own, grew from the lower torso, below the sternum. Diaphanous wings lay folded across its back.

A fetus, but not one born of anything of this world.

Although the creature didn't move, I sensed that life still existed in it, that it slept in some sort of dormant state.

More than that, I discerned it held a relation to me, in more than just the physical sense.

"Behold, your distant brother," Callie said from behind me.

My heart soared. Somehow one of Mother's previous offspring had survived! Rescued by the Followers and kept safe for how long? Decades? Centuries? Hidden away all these many years, until….

What?

I stared at the thing, so similar and yet so different from my half brothers and sisters that were even now staking their claims in the rivers and sea trenches surrounding Arkham and Innsmouth. Did the Followers expect me to do something with it? I cursed the continuing misfortune that seemed to dog my every step. Not only was my brain still struggling to comprehend the knowledge passed down to me by 'Fhalma, bad luck had taken from me the very book of spells I needed to revive my slumbering cousin? Half brother? What relation was it to me?

I withheld a sigh of despair as I handed the jar back to the old woman. Much as I desired to wake the creature, it would have to wait for another time.

I had more urgent matters to take care of.

First, I needed to gather the Followers to me and prepare for whatever assault Ben Olmstead had in store. Secondly, I would amass an army so that I could begin my conquest of Innsmouth and the surrounding areas. I would not repeat my father's mistakes. When I launched my attack, it would be with a force large enough to assure an easy victory.

A force I needed to begin assembling. My enemies would no doubt be doing the same. Guns, fire, and explosives. Flannery knew what was needed.

"How many are we?" I asked. The other supplicant, a gaunt fellow with a hairless, liver-spotted pate, stood and motioned toward the ruins.

Figures appeared, emerging in twos and threes. Men and women, some no older than myself, others well along in years. Their clothing marked them from all walks of life. The ragged uniforms of laborers and the fancy suits of well-heeled businessmen and professors stood side by side. All wore a pin or brooch in the now-familiar octopodal design.

As they approached, they formed rows and went down on their knees. Twenty, thirty, then forty. When the last of them knelt before me, I counted fifty-three. Enough to take on Flannery and his squad? Probably not, unless we had weapons of our own.

Or another type of advantage.

The answer appeared in my head as if I'd always known it. A single egg, placed in the bloodstream. Similar to what my father had done with the dead men, only the effects would be far different in living flesh. They would not be true hybrids such as I, but rather living hosts, hidden demons capable of walking unnoticed among humans.

Would there be enough time? The hatchlings would require at least three days to metamorphose fully, but far less than that to begin melding with muscle and bone, adding supernatural strength and healing power to human flesh.

It would have to do.

"Come to me and become one with Scythalla." I extended my tentacles, like an otherworldly preacher addressing his flock.

They rose and approached in single file. As each one stopped before me, I pressed a tentacle to their neck and introduced one egg into the carotid artery. A gasp of pain, and then the acolyte moved on, new life already blossoming inside them.

I recognized Professor Angell's secretary among them, her eyes cast downward now, no sign of her former arrogance evident. That act of respect stayed my hand from using more force than necessary to inject her. A good leader ruled strongly but fairly, and I intended to be a good leader. Demanding but not unnecessarily cruel.

When I finished, I entered the ruins, my Followers behind me. As I passed through the obelisks and columns, the symbols and glyphs formed patterns again, but this time rather than making me dizzy with terror, they delivered snippets of information about the race that carved them – which I now read as the Xothians – and their ancient city of R'lyeh. Not Celephaïs, as Angell had thought, although I knew now that place, too, existed, only at the opposite pole. If anything was buried there, it was either too deep or too dormant for me to sense.

Looking around, I understood the problem Angell and Gardiner had encountered, and why they could never solve it on their own. Angell had been correct in his belief that the carvings told of a battle, but that was only

half the story. In fact, they contained not only a history of the Xothians' attempted colonization of Earth and the Great Wars that followed, but also all the rites necessary to raise Asgotha from his slumber in Antarctica. There was only one problem.

The ritual required the physical presence of another Xothian, or one of their descendants.

In order to raise the last Xothian on Earth, I would need to travel across the world and perform the ritual in person.

I added that to my list of things to do once my present situation was resolved. There was no need to rush. Staying alive and hidden was paramount; the rest would follow. Move slow and steady, one step at a time. Once I defeated Flannery and his men, then I could assemble my army at my leisure, while my children matured out at sea. After that, with an unstoppable army at my side, the conquest of Innsmouth and the surrounding towns. Only then, with land and water under my control, would I venture to Antarctica and free Asgotha.

And the whole world would tremble at our feet.

Until that day, I must remain vigilant and ready. No doubt Ben had gone to Flannery and he was already mustering his troops for the attack. I had to assume Ben overheard Callie and me discussing Miskatonic. Although not a learned man, Flannery possessed a better than average intelligence. His first guess would be the same as mine were he in my position.

Here, in the history building. The place of the ruins and Professor Gardiner's death.

"We must mount guards," I said to Callie. "Is there another entrance other than the outer office?"

"No. And there are no windows. We are in the lowest level."

"Good." That would make it easier to defend. "Arrange our people in rows. Use the columns for concealment. If there are any weapons in here, gather them."

Callie nodded, and I noticed her hair had receded several inches up her forehead. Her eyes appeared different as well, larger and rounder, the pupils no longer perfect circles.

The changes are beginning already.

Whether from my offspring growing within her or my blood transforming her flesh, I couldn't say. Nor did I care the reason why. The only thing of importance was that it happened, and it happened quickly, to

Callie and the rest of those I had changed. Only with a superhuman army behind me would I defeat Flannery and his guns.

"Come. There is something you must see." Callie motioned for me to follow her into the maze of obelisks and statues.

I perceived the pattern instinctively even though it was incomplete, the majority of the columns and monuments still buried deep in the ice and rock of Antarctica. Four concentric spirals, each radiating from a central shared point, a common design for Xothian cities. As we walked, my mind – or Scythalla's memories – filled in the gaps between the stone blocks. Temples, war rooms, mating chambers. Earth had little in common with Mother's home world, a massive planet with an atmosphere thicker than water, through which she and her kind propelled themselves like the squids they so resembled. On Earth, this limited them to large bodies of water, rivers and oceans, and the nearby shorelines. Thus the necessity for breeding with select humans and creating hybrids. Creatures equally at home on land and in the sea, with abilities far beyond the ken of mankind. Not gods, but in eons past looked upon as such.

Or as demons.

We had already walked much farther than possible, given the size of the building. Yet still the edifices continued, disappearing into the distance as if we'd been transported to another place entirely, to the very source of the ruins perhaps.

The deeper we penetrated the ruins, the more my comprehension of the symbols and the language of the Xothians grew. My flesh rippled and shivered, my body changing along with my mind. Complex formulae appeared in my head, part magic and part science, or perhaps something in between. Incantations and equations to control forces natural and unnatural.

I examined each one, trying to find anything I could use against my enemies, but the information I needed lay frustratingly out of reach, like trying to understand books with too many missing pages.

With my thoughts consumed by the coming battle, I didn't notice the path widening ahead of us until Callie came to a stop.

"For you," she said.

Ahead of us sat a stone platform, a pyramid sheared off through its center, easily twice the height of a tall man. A large object sat in the center of it.

A throne.

Carved from basalt so black it seemed to absorb the light like a bottomless chasm, it captured the eye with its otherworldly magnificence. Complex etchings covered the arms, legs, and back with creatures, planets, and words that defied description. I bounded up the stairs and approached it. Despite the unforgiving look of it, I felt comfortable when I sat, as if it had been hewn specifically for my measurements. Which in a way, it had. For surely the ancient artisans had known what they were making, and how the human form would transmogrify after being granted Scythalla's gift.

Four of the Followers brought forth a smaller seat, similar in shape and carved from the same stone, but without decoration. Callie motioned at it. "With your permission, my king?"

"Of course." Only fitting that my first queen should sit by my side. Together we would bring forth a new world and rule over it. She would be my right hand, and someday one of my offspring would sit at my left. It would take decades, perhaps even a century, to remake the Earth so that the gateway to the stars could be opened. And during that time I would place my progeny on similar thrones throughout the continents, each ruling their own city.

With the powers of the gods to back them.

All the things my father could have had, if only he'd not been lost in his own desire for absolute supremacy.

I hope you can see me, Father, from your place in the cold fires of hell. Is your heart burning with envy watching me do what you could not? Be what you could not? The world will be mine.

I could see it, cities in ruins, land and sea overtaken by the minions I would place throughout the globe. Things of nightmares, brought forth not just from my loins but through magical castings. They would be my foot soldiers and serve alongside those of my own blood….

Wait.

Blood.

My head snapped up. I hadn't even been aware I'd fallen asleep. Or into some kind of trance. Whatever state I'd been in, something had happened. A door opening, just a crack. But enough for me to view the answer to my current problem.

And it lay within me.

Blood. How could I not have seen it before? Mother's blood had transformed me, and my father before me, and at least one other before

that. Blood capable of waking the dead, just as it had brought Flora back to life. Yes, it had also changed her, turned her into a living ghoul. But that shouldn't matter this time.

The one I needed to awake wasn't human. Nor was it completely dead.

"Bring the sleeping one," I commanded.

Two Followers scurried off like mice fleeing a hungry cat.

"You've an idea?" Callie asked. Her face had taken on a greenish pallor and her once-emerald eyes were now the emotionless gray of a shark's.

"I know how to bring him back to us."

Far above us, voices shouted, followed by the unmistakable sound of gunfire.

"Good. For I fear my brother has found us."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I stared at the devilish chimera afloat in whatever preservative surrounded him and fought to keep self-doubt from showing on my face. A king couldn't display weakness.

My preference would have been to attempt the awakening in private, in case I failed. But time had run out. My enemies had arrived sooner than I'd expected, and it sounded like Ben had brought an entire militia with him.

The Followers I'd dispatched to slow them down would serve as little more than cannon fodder, because they'd stand no chance against armed men, not with their bodies only in the beginning stages of transformation. The creatures within them were still only embryos, with little to offer their hosts.

A Follower opened the jar. The harsh odor of purified alcohol burned my nose. At my gesture, he removed the body and placed it on the ground before me. I touched a talon to my wrist and paused. It occurred to me that even if my blood revived my not-so-distant relative, I had no way of knowing what state of mind it would be in.

But what choice did I have? The shouts and gunfire were drawing closer.

I pierced my flesh and quickly placed my arm over the still form, which appeared more squid-like than ever, far more so than either myself or my father. Using my other hand, I squeezed the wound as hard as I could, wringing out a trickle of dark ichor that dwindled to mere drops as my body healed itself.

The moment my blood touched the rubbery flesh, it disappeared, absorbed faster than water on a thick cloth. The octopoid body vibrated once, twice. Bulbous eyes opened, revealing fiery yellow orbs that burned with fearful intelligence.

The creature sprang up and shot through the air, landing on the face of the nearest Follower. A muffled scream turned into a choking gasp and then the man fell as if poleaxed. A loud suckling sound ensued. Rivulets of blood dripped down the man's cheeks. Seconds later, his face caved in, the flesh

shriveling like a mummy's. His arms did the same, and his chest collapsed with a great sigh.

At the same time, the thing's color changed from a pale gray to a dark green. Its body inflated and I could swear the tentacles lengthened. Even its human appendages appeared to thicken.

The infant rose on suddenly muscular legs and looked up at Callie and me. Horizontal, rectangular black pupils floated within seas of yellow flecked with orange. Its mouth opened and it emitted a series of wet grunts and clicks, like a frog calling underwater.

To my surprise, I understood it.

"Gnaiih?"

"It thinks me its father," I said, as much to myself as to Callie. It spoke the language of the Elders, which came to me as if I'd known it all my life.

"Gof'n ot ya 'fhalma," I replied, my throat forming words no human could attempt. *Child of my mother.*

I spread my wings and tentacles to show it our shared heritage.

"Ahf' agl ah fahf?" *What place is this?* Its alien gaze showed no emotion for having spent countless decades in unnatural slumber.

"Ymg' mgepfhtagn ehyeeog y'or'nahh." *You slept many years.*

"Ya fhtagn mgeplllln'gha ya." *My dreams consumed me.*

That made me pause. What would one such as this dream? And how had it not gone insane, for surely it had to sense the passage of time in some way, even if it was not awake.

"Ahf' ymg' ah yaah?" *What is your name?*

"Y' mgep mg yaah." *I have no name.* Undoubtedly he'd been captured not long after birth: weeks, or perhaps only days. But much like the squids and octopi all the half-breeds resembled, he was in many ways fully functional, despite his embryonic appearance.

I wanted to question him further but shouting reached us from somewhere outside the storage room. We only had moments before the invaders broke down the door and attacked.

"C' mghrii nog," I said. "C' ahnythor mgehye'bthnk. Ymg' ah'n'ghft." *Our enemies come. We must fight. Hide yourself.*

It cocked its head toward the exit just as the crash of wood and glass breaking stole my next words. This was it.

From our vantage point, I was able to see across the cavernous space. Dozens of men shouldered their way through the broken door. Callie called

out to the Followers, who sprang from their hiding places. Gunfire and screams filled the air. Cries of pain came from both sides of the melee.

Followers tumbled to the floor, their bodies gushing blood. Others, those whose hatchlings had matured enough to effect physical changes, leaped into the fray with half-formed tentacles whipping back and forth. Surprise and terror made up for a lack of weapons. Ben had no doubt informed the police of what they'd be facing, but hearing it and encountering the reality were two vastly different things.

I leaped off the platform to join the battle, Callie close behind. The labyrinth of columns and statues not only provided cover but confused our attackers even more, creating among them the same disorienting effects I'd felt when encountering them as a human. The Followers used that to their advantage, darting in and out, striking from behind. Bullets buzzed through the air like angry bees. The thud of nightsticks, rifle butts, and fists striking flesh was a drumbeat of violence playing counterpoint to the screams of pain.

Then a familiar voice rose above the din, shouting for the men to regroup.

Flannery.

I changed direction, using the inspector's bellowing as a beacon. He was the one I needed to kill. Without him, the others would have no leader and they'd fall before us.

He stood between two obelisks, Ben Olmstead right behind him. Both carried pistols in hand. Flannery also held an electric torch, while Ben's injured arm hung in a makeshift sling. I stepped in front of them, arms and wings spread.

"Gilman." Flannery evidenced no shock at my appearance, although his mouth twisted in disgust beneath his mustache.

For a moment, the world shifted around me and I was once again in the cavern below Innsmouth, dozens of weapons pointed at me as I begged for mercy.

Then Callie spoke from somewhere behind me and I returned to the present.

"You shouldn't have followed us, brother." Her voice carried no trace of emotion. Ben's eyes went wide.

"Callie?" He looked around. "Where are you?"

She stepped out from the shadow of a megalith and pride filled my heart. Head held high, a dagger carved from volcanic glass in one hand, she took her place at my side. In the glow of Flannery's torch, her skin was greenish

marble and her eyes reflected the light like a wild animal's. Her body was changing at a rapid pace. I saw the beginnings of gills on her neck, similar to my own. Her nails were sharp and black, although much shorter than my talons. Traces of webbing showed between her fingers. I wondered if the rest of the Followers would advance so quickly in their own regeneration. If so, we stood a better chance than I'd first believed.

Ben moaned at the sight of her.

"God in heaven, Henry. What have you done to her?"

I extended a tentacle at him and he stepped back. "You stole the most important part of my life. Now I've taken that which you cherished more than anything and made her my queen."

Flannery growled through clenched teeth. "You've gone too far, Gilman." He raised his gun but my reflexes were faster. I struck the weapon away, and then Ben's, leaving them with lash marks on their arms and the knowledge I could just as easily tear their limbs from their bodies. That would come, but I needed them to realize they no longer dealt with the old Henry Gilman, the one who'd groveled before them.

Now they would be the ones to kneel and beg for mercy.

Flannery jumped back and blew his whistle. In response, footsteps pounded in our direction. Several officers appeared, rumpled and bruised but ready to fight. One of them fired a pistol and sparks glittered as it ricocheted off a nearby column. I leaped at them, my tentacles whipping back and forth, slicing open flesh with wild abandon.

Fists and batons beat against me with little effect; I felt them as little more than dull blows. I tasted their blood through my many mouths and it fueled my rage. I dodged left and right like a boxer, making it impossible for those who still held guns to aim properly. From the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of Ben and Flannery tackling Callie. She fought back like a madwoman, more than a match for them even after she lost her knife.

I snapped the necks of two officers and tossed the bodies aside. Turning, I prepared to put an end to the lives of my sworn enemies when a tremendous blow struck me between the shoulders and I went down. I rolled over and something fell across me. The more I moved, the more I became tangled in it.

Fishing net!

I poked the tips of my tentacles through the holes and began to tear through the layers of heavy line. A half dozen men fell upon me and battered

my head and shoulders with heavy clubs. Colors flashed before my eyes and I feared my brains might end up spread across the floor. I heaved myself up with all my strength and managed to throw my attackers off long enough to finish ripping my way clear of the netting. Three men approached me holding cricket bats, of all things. Movements to my left and right told me Flannery's men had taken the opportunity to circle around us while I'd been incapacitated.

Flannery stood up, clutching Callie to his chest with one arm. Somehow he'd gotten a gun and had it pointed at her head.

"That's enough, Gilman. We can do this the easy way or the hard way." His eyes told me which he preferred; me dead on the floor, even if bringing me back to Innsmouth alive for a public hanging would gain him more notoriety.

"You promised you wouldn't kill her." Ben's voice held no conviction.

"If she was human," Flannery said. Ben's mouth tightened but he didn't argue. Perhaps he'd been resigned to losing her ever since he found us together at his apartment.

Even with my superhuman reach, I had no chance of getting past the officers who stood between me and Flannery to save Callie. I stared at her, regret and fury warring within me that once again he was about to steal a woman from me.

Flannery smiled and his finger tightened on the trigger.

Callie's head darted down and she sank razor-sharp teeth into his arm. Flannery shouted and she slipped free. Ben lunged for her and she drove her knee into his nether region. He doubled over and she darted past.

An officer smashed his baton across the back of her head and she collapsed to the floor.

Flannery cursed. "Enough of this shite. Tie him up and I'll put an end to this one."

Two men approached me, holding out more of the heavy fishnet. I tensed, ready to lash them the moment they got in range.

"Watch him," Ben said. The men stopped. Flannery motioned with his hand and three other officers appeared, with flaming torches.

"Mind yourself, Gilman." He gave me a nasty grin. "Fire cleanses your kind, as it does all evil. My da knew that. I never believed his stories about the real cause of the plague that ruined Innsmouth, not until I saw those creatures of your father's in the morgue. But I remembered what he told

me, how they put an end to the troubles. That's how I knew what needed to be done with your father, and that beast in the cave. I'm betting you don't want to go the same way."

I didn't. Bruises, gunshots, even broken bones I could heal. But I'd seen how badly fire damaged 'Fhalma and my father. Better to let them tie me up. As long as I lived, I maintained the possibility of finding a way to escape.

Callie would not be so lucky, and that infuriated me to my core.

I'd no doubt I could replace her as a breeding queen, but she'd already proven herself more than that. An able companion, intelligent, ruthless, and devoted to her king.

And as much as I loathed to admit it, I still harbored feelings for her. She belonged to me.

All of those things made her irreplaceable and I vowed I would have revenge for her death.

Flannery raised his gun as the netting wrapped around me once more, binding me like a man in a nuthouse jacket. I tensed, preparing myself for the awful sound of Callie's death.

A high-pitched keening filled the air and Flannery tumbled to the side with a grunt. Through the layers of hemp, I caught a glimpse of something, a pale object flying in and out of the circle of light cast by the torches. The men around me shouted and glanced wildly in all directions.

"N'gha l' ymg'!" cried a familiar voice. *Death to you.*

My heart soared as the Unnamed One landed between Ben and Callie. Its wings fluttered as it balanced itself on human legs and two pseudopodal appendages. I noticed immediately it was much larger than before, almost four feet tall. Blood – the red blood of men – dripped from its tentacles and its mouth. Its growing power reached me through the ethereal bond we shared, a humming like that of a telegraph wire. It had undoubtedly been feeding on Flannery's men, and I expected we'd find more than a few behind the pillars, their bodies drained of fluids.

A gun went off and my half brother twitched. A dull ache blossomed in my shoulder just as the Unnamed One let out another keening wail. It jumped into the air with a sound like a steam engine releasing pressure and sailed over my head. I tried to turn but the netting hindered me. I fought it, chewing at it with my sucker-mouths and pulling it apart with tentacles and hands. No one stopped me; the police all focused their attention on the new arrival.

Screams of pain echoed from stone and cement, making it impossible to determine the creature's location. I freed my arms and emerged from my fibrous cocoon. Something landed at my feet with a sound like a sack of mud.

A leg, still in blue uniform pants.

Seeing Flannery on his knees and shaking his head, and Ben standing frozen in shock, I went to Callie, who was just opening her eyes.

"I'm not dead."

"Neither of us will die today," I told her. "We've an unexpected ace up our sleeve."

She frowned, and I explained as I half dragged her to a spot behind a pillar carved with battle scenes, too reminiscent of our own fight for my pleasure. After assuring myself she wasn't seriously injured, I returned to the fray, with the intention of finally giving Ben Olmstead his due. And Flannery as well, if the Unnamed One hadn't already taken his life.

"That's far enough, Gilman." Flannery's voice. He stood near a pillar, Ben at his side. They each held a flaming torch, were using them to keep the Unnamed One at bay. It snarled and gnashed its teeth, its tentacles twitching and coiling like a nest of cobras waiting to strike. Scorch marks on its pale flesh showed it had already made several attempts to get to them.

I slowly edged to my left, forcing them to split their attention. One of them was bound to falter, and then either I or my blood brother would take advantage of the mistake.

"This is the end," I said. One of my tentacles flicked out, leaving a red welt on Ben's good arm. He gasped but held onto the torch. "You offered me a choice once upon a time. Now I offer you one. Die or surrender."

"So you can turn us into walking abominations?" Flannery spat in our direction. "I think not."

I nodded. I'd expected nothing less. Once more I lashed out, this time striking Ben's leg. He stumbled and Flannery gripped his arm. I thought it was to support him, but too late I realized he had something else in mind.

"Now!" Flannery shouted. The two of them threw their torches at us and then turned and ran for the exit. I made to follow and then came to a stop as dozens of bottles landed around us and shattered. I had just enough time to smell the kerosene before it ignited, waves of flame springing to life and blocking our escape. Acrid fumes burned my eyes and the blaze grew higher as the fire quickly spread across the floor and climbed up the walls.

The Unnamed One screeched in terror. Callie called out to me.

"This way! Hurry!"

I dashed toward her, my stepbrother leap-hopping alongside me. We sped past the throne platform and I saw several of the Followers ahead of us.

"There's another exit," Callie said, as we caught up to her. "It leads to—"

A sonorous roar overwhelmed her next words. The floor shook and plaster dust fell from the ceiling. Pillars and monuments toppled over, the massive shapes threatening to crush us as we dodged left and right to avoid them.

Explosives!

I cursed Flannery and his devious ingenuity, and my own foolishness. I should have known he'd try something like this; after all, I'd seen him use the very same tactic against my father. Such a simple plan, and I'd failed to anticipate it. While most of his men kept the Followers – and me – occupied, a few others had planted explosives throughout the storeroom. And when Flannery saw the tide turning against him, he'd set his devious strategy in motion.

The kerosene had merely been a distraction so we didn't see them lighting the fuses.

And now my error might be the end of us all.

I ran faster. Our only hope was to reach the exit and escape the building before it crashed down around us.

Another deafening explosion and suddenly we were running downhill as the floor gave way ahead of us. I tried to stop but my feet found no traction. I fell and rolled over, digging my claws into the floor and trying to grab hold of anything with my tentacles. I heard screaming through the ringing in my ears.

A stentorian rumble caused me to look up just in time to see a massive block of stone sliding toward me. I tried to leap out of the way, using all my limbs, but I was too slow. It struck me in the side, knocking the breath from my lungs and shattering several bones.

This time the screams I heard were my own as the pain overwhelmed me. Through a red haze, I watched a gigantic black mouth open before me.

And then it swallowed me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Agony carved through my body. Every limb, every bone, down to my soul. Each breath stabbed at me like a thousand knives.

But I still breathed.

All of this came to me before my awareness even fully returned.

I lived!

I opened my eyes, a painful process in itself. Darkness surrounded me, but my superior vision allowed me to take in details that would have otherwise been lost. Curved stone walls above me. An underground cavern of some kind. For an instant I imagined myself back in my father's lair, that everything I'd experienced since Flannery shot me had been just a dream. Even the air smelled the same, river water and wet earth. I actually heard the ripples of gently flowing water against the shore very close to me.

Something moved off to one side. I attempted to turn my head but the grinding of broken bones in my shoulders and the resurgence of my misery stopped me.

"Hello, Henry." The welcome voice shattered the illusion of being cast back in time.

Callie! She had found me. "Help." It came out as a whisper but she heard me. Moved closer. Knelt by my side so I could see her face.

Her metamorphosis had continued. Most of her hair had fallen out and the gill slits were clearly visible on her neck. Her mouth had widened, and when she smiled I saw teeth like a shark's. Her nose was flatter than before, although it had not yet evolved into the two flap-like openings such as mine. Her eyes shined a dull gray and I realized there had to be some kind of light somewhere in order for them to reflect it.

When she placed a hand on my arm, I felt pointed talons caress my injured flesh.

"I didn't think you would survive this long," she said. Her words reached me through a buzzing in my ears. The aftereffects of Flannery's

explosives, or an injury to my head? I tried to focus on her words but her face kept wavering, creating a double image that came and went.

"We pulled you from the water. It was Professor Angell's idea to build the storage room over your unnamed underground river, you know. The same one that flows all the way to Innsmouth. It was intended that someday we would entice Scythalla or Asgotha from the sea to the university. Imagine his surprise when I tell him she was only miles away this whole time."

Her nails dug deeper, drawing a whimper of pain from me. I tried to pull my arm away but she gripped it, holding it tight.

"The explosion opened the floor. Only a few of us lived. The entire damned building came down on us. I told you Ben would stop at nothing, but you didn't listen. Now we have to leave. Nowhere in New England is safe for us anymore, thanks to you. Your Officer Flannery and my brother escaped. They still live, and they'll be looking for any signs of you or me or H' ahf' fhtagn."

He who dreams.

"Who…?" I stopped. She'd spoken the language of the Elders. When had she learned it?

How long had I lain here?

"Your half brother. We have named him. He carries the blood of Scythalla, even more than you do. He knows what you know, his powers…he will lead us now. First to where Asgotha sleeps, and then into the future."

What kind of treachery was this? I had to be hearing her wrong, mistaking her words. My injured brain….

"No. I am your king. You must help me."

Callie laughed, and a second voice joined in. Movement, a blurred shape behind her, and then he stood next to her. The Unnamed One – He Who Dreams – only no longer a child. A man, taller and broader of shoulder than I. He placed a hand on Callie's head and she sighed.

"Ymg' yar ph' ah. H' mgepah mgsyha'h l' mgepah'gotha ah."

Your time is over. It was never meant to be.

His voice was guttural, each word carrying a sense of power brimming to be released.

"You have served your purpose, Henry," Callie said. "Done what you were always meant to do: waken the true king. We needed one of

the blood to do it, either your father or you. And now we must depart. Someday we will return to this place, the Dreamer and I, with his children and their children, to claim the throne. But there is much to do before then. The Followers await us in New York, a town called Rocky Point. From there we'll make our way across the world to Antarctica, leaving behind those of the blood at each stop. So that when the time comes, our army will be mighty and waiting for us.

"Goodbye, Henry. I hope you don't suffer here for too long."

I summoned what little bit of strength I had left. She wouldn't get away with this! "I will kill you. I—" Something shifted inside me and stabbed my lung, preventing me from finishing my sentence.

"I don't think so," she said. "But maybe I shouldn't take the chance. I'll send a message to Ben, let him know where he can find you."

Callie rose and took the Dreamer's hand. Together they disappeared into the gloom, leaving me broken and alone. I lay there, my body on fire and my thoughts flickering as I struggled to remain conscious.

Disloyal harlot! The truth of things ate at me. I'd been so blind. Looking back, I saw where I'd been foolish, believing her because she was Callie, the honest young woman I'd known all my life, the woman who carried an unrequited love for me.

Now I had to wonder if that had even been true. She'd as much admitted she'd been sullied and degraded by the Followers. Surely that meant her motives and sense of honor would be just as suspect. But I'd never questioned her.

Not even when I saw the Dreamer in his glass womb.

I should have questioned its physical differences then, but I was overwhelmed with the joy of discovering it.

Yet how could it be a stepbrother to me? It hadn't been a human turned by Mother's blood, like me or my father. Nor could it be a child of one such as I, for that would make it less of the blood, more human than not. Only one creature could give birth to such a thing.

Scythalla herself.

Another of Callie's lies. She and the Followers had to know the Dreamer's true nature. And everything the Followers had done since then, every machination, was to fulfill their true goal, of awakening the Dreamer. Not, as she'd led me to believe, of placing Scythalla's chosen one – me – on the throne. I had merely been a tool, a means to an end.

No doubt if I'd lived through the encounter with Flannery, they'd have found a way to dispose of me once they no longer needed the knowledge I held. Once he matured, the Dreamer would be a formidable opponent, one I couldn't possibly hope to take on single-handedly.

Not that it mattered. I'd discovered my folly too late. The irony of my situation hurt almost as much as my physical injuries. I'd come full circle, once again abandoned to die alone in an underground cavern. Only this time there'd be no *'Fhalma,* no Mother, to save me.

I closed my eyes and let the pain take me. It served as fuel for the fire burning inside me, the white-hot fury of my hatred. Flannery, Ben, Callie, the Followers. My father. Even Scythalla, for surely this all began with her. I wished terrible deaths on them all, on everyone who'd ever wronged me. I prayed to all the gods of the universe and all the demons to exact my retribution for me, since I'd never live to carry it out myself.

Caught up in my fantasy of vengeance, I didn't notice the brightening of the cavern until the glow penetrated my eyelids. I opened my eyes and beheld an impossible sight, one that had me questioning if I'd passed into some sort of near-death hallucination.

Miniature flames surrounded me, tiny stars that smoldered like yellow sparks.

No, not stars, I amended, as several drew closer.

Brothers and sisters.

My father's offspring! The ones I'd commanded to stay in the river to await my return. Somehow they'd found me.

Their numbers grew, a dozen, then three. I felt their obedience, their loyalty, pour over me.

These were my true brothers and sisters; they shared my blood, my heritage.

My desire to rule.

Help me, I commanded them. And I knew they could. Their blood was my blood, after all. Tiny as they were, they could only spare a drop each. One by one they climbed onto my face and pricked themselves, let that single droplet fall onto my tongue. Not enough to heal me. Not nearly enough. But a start. My pain began to subside. More of them fed me, and I felt my body stabilize.

They called out to their kin, the ones far away in the ocean, in the nearby rivers. It would take them days, weeks, to reach us. If we stayed

here, we would die, for I'd bet all the coin in Innsmouth that Callie would make good on her threat to inform her brother of my whereabouts.

I pushed myself a few inches, digging my feet into the wet soil. Even that exertion exhausted me. No matter. My family would feed me again in a short while, and I would move a little farther. I would keep moving in that fashion until I reached the water, and from there my brothers and sisters would guide me to safety. A place where I could recover at my own speed. And recover I would.

I wasn't the only one to misjudge an enemy.

Callie should have disposed of me when she had the chance. My body would heal. Even if it took months, or years. I would use that time to plan my vengeance.

This time I wouldn't fail.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, I have to thank a few people, without whom this book wouldn't have been possible.

My wife, Andrea, for all her support of me and my writing.

My mother, who is also a tireless supporter of mine.

My friends and family, who are always there to give me a laugh or pull me away from my desk for a good dinner, a nice drink, or a Sunday Fun Day.

Bruno, our rescue pup, who makes me smile and reminds me to exercise.

My fantastic beta readers, Rena Mason, James Chambers, Erinn Kemper, Patrick Freivald, Chris Marrs, Peter Salomon, Lisa Morton, and Brian Matthews, who always make me better. They're also great writers in their own right, so you should check them out.

The people at Flame Tree who make the magic happen. Don D'Auria, my editor. Gillian Whitaker, Maria Tissot, Molly Rosevear, Josie Karani, Nick Wells, and the fantastic editing and art teams, who do such a great job of getting the books in shape and putting amazing covers on them. You are all a huge part of this, and I thank you.

And finally, a big thank you to everyone reading this. Without readers, writers would become as extinct as dodos.

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