BLACK SHIPS SEEN SOUTH OF HEAVEN

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The clouds will part and the sky cracks open, And God himself will reach his fucking arm through...

-NIN

BEFORE, IN THE TIME THAT WAS BEFORE, THIS WAS A city of the living and the whole. It was not a city of blank-eyed warriors and broken women and pregnancies mercifully terminated before fresh teratisms can be born. It was not wasted and besieged. There were no watchful ramparts, and Midway and O'Hare International ferried civilian traffic, because there was civilian traffic. Before. There were unguarded highways into the city, before the fall of Manhattan and Boston and D.C. and pretty much everything else bordering the Atlantic, from Greenland to Tierra del Fuego. Before the city became a pounding ring of field, medium, and heavy batteries, 105 mm howitzers, 155 mm, 203 mm, anti-aircraft and rocket artillery. Before the sea turned black and engulfed the East, and before the waters of Lake Michigan froze over with jaundiced ice that's immune to the heat of burning skies and molten shores.

Before the probe came home from the Kuiper belt, when it was never supposed to come home at all.

Before the beginning of the war.

The beginning of The End, which some will say is the simply the Beginning. Even within the ragged fortress of Chicago, there are zealous priests and necromancers who pray day and night to the Old Things for the fall of all mankind. They have the books. They know the names. They spill blood on secret altars. Agents of the Guard hunt them, but it's a hunt as futile as stalking the swarms of rats and the dogs and cats gone feral and vicious.

The once-were names for the days have been discarded.

This is Thunderday.

And on this Thunderday, Susannah takes her weekly turn on the eastern wall, with all the others who come on at dawn. She hardly ever sleeps anymore. She can, in fact, only just recall the last time she slept more than one or two hours at once. It's better that way; the dreams that are no longer merely dreams are kept at bay by wakefulness. But because insomnia weakens, the infirmaries handed out amphetamines and methamphetamine as long as the supplies lasted. Which wasn't long. Besides, Susannah recalls that the drug-induced hallucinations that visited her after several drugged days without any sleep at all were almost as bad as the nightmares.

"Stay sharp," the Captain of the Guard says as she settles into one of the plastic patio chairs tucked inside the concrete pillbox. As if it's necessary to remind her, but she supposes he has to say *something*, so she's never complained. Futility is the rule After, not the exception.

She smokes stale tobacco and listens to the skinny kid from what used to be Elmwood Park, back when, back before the crimson drifters and the rain that sets fires. Back before. Before that island rose up from the South Pacific, from very near that oceanic pole of inaccessibility—the point on the planet farthest from any landmass. Near to Point Nemo. 47° 9′ S 126° 43′ W. And maybe you didn't know jack shit about geography before, but now those coordinates are etched into the mind of the survivors, as indelible as their own names. The zealots and the enemies of man call it R'lyeh. Susannah just calls it Hell.

"Sue, you see that?" asks the Elwood kid. She wishes he wouldn't call her Sue, because that's what her mother called her. But she always lets it go. The kid's pointing across No Man's Land towards Indiana. "You *see* that?"

She picks up the one pair of binoculars allotted to the pillbox and tries to spot whatever it is the kid thinks he saw. But there's only the glistening polychromatic canopy of the forest that presses in at the walls and stretches away, seemingly, forever.

"I don't see anything," she replies, and he curses.

"I know what I saw."

"Then why don't you tell me, and then we'll both know?"

But he doesn't. He sulks, instead. He sits in his patio chair reading an old paperback, neglecting the job that insures him room and rations.

Susannah knows better, but she lets the binoculars linger on the forest. The stalks of fungus that once were men and women, back before the plague. Before. Not that it's well and truly over. But most people in the city talk about the plague as if it were something that's come and gone, and they do their best to ignore the infected who cower in the alleyways and deserted husks of buildings. They stay indoors or in the bunkers on days when the prevailing winds bring clouds of spores north. The stay inside until the decon teams have done their best to scrub away the microscopic contagion. If they find a growth on their own bodies, they keep it a secret as long as they can. They cloak themselves in denial. Which is how

Susannah has made it through the last month, since she found the shiny wet spot on her left hip.

Only a matter of time now, but so is everything else.

It's all winding down.

The world has known the war is lost for years, since the nukes that failed to scratch the pillars of that vast island that shrugged off the sea. Since the fireballs and fallout failed to do anything but piss off the titans that stride across the world, bringing havoc at their leisure.

Susannah wishes that the ceaseless movement of the forest were only an illusion created by distance and the heat haze. But she knows it's no mirage. She knows all those men, women, and children who've been assimilated, absorbed, transformed, what the fuck ever, are still alive and still conscious and still in agony. As she will be soon enough.

She knows too much of what the CDC and WHO and etcetera learned before the airwaves and satellites went silent.

The Survivors' Prayer: Lord, let me be ignorant.

But she's an atheist. Susannah has no prayer.

"They're not gods," she said on the Worstday she met the boy when he wouldn't shut up about the monsters. "They're just shit from other places. That's all they are."

Maybe it's easier to accept The End if it's being brought by a malevolent pantheon than by indifferent aliens. She wouldn't know.

"I don't see anything," she says again, right as the sirens go off. She still jumps at the sirens, as if they meant something more than the opening of the southern gates to send the latest batch of fungal terminals out to join those who have gone before them. She always jumps as if it were ebony wings bearing down on the city.

"Jesus, Sue. Get a grip," the boy tells her, not even looking up from his paperback.

She tells him to go fuck himself, flicks the butt of her cigarette away, then trains the binoculars on the asphalt scab of I-394, Forest Road. There are only a couple dozen today. Susannah watches as they stagger away towards writhing stalks and the shadows below the enormous iridescent caps. She watches for five, ten, maybe fifteen minutes. It's easy to lose track of time on the wall.

She knows that forest all too well. Susannah arrived with one of the last groups of refugees, and the convoy came much, much too near to the fruiting bodies. She was sixteen then. Her mother had died back in Ohio. Her father had not even made it out of Boston. That was five years ago. Five years and spare change. Back when stupid motherfuckers and military strategists still talked about offensives, pushing back, *winning*.

They called the invaders gods, and they talked about winning.

It's one of the sickest jokes Susannah knows.

The moon rises like a boil, bloated, livid. No one bothers asking anymore how the moon can rise when the sun never seems to set.

"Did you hear that?" the Elmwood kid asks, dropping his paperback, his eyes all at once wild, but looking at her instead of looking out over the wastes.

"I didn't hear anything," she says, which is true.

He's silent a moment, then says, "They've left us alone for almost a week. You know this can't go on, Sue. You know they must be planning something big."

"Go back to your book," she replies.

"I heard wings," he all but whispers.

"Go back to your book."

"I swear to god, Sue, I'm putting in a request for a new partner. I'm not joking with you."

"You do that. But right now, you shut up and go back to your book."

"I swear I'm going to."

"Fine with me."

She wants to tell him not to bother. She wants to confess her infection. Her hip itches constantly, and she knows that in another week or two she'll be one of the alley lurkers, and by next month she'll be staggering out the gate, unable to resist the siren song, dragging what's left of her body towards the forest. Maybe the kid will watch her go. Maybe he'll even recognize her.

Probably he won't.

She's never recognized any of those who've left to take their places as part of that vast colonial organism.

Susannah still remembers the TV broadcasts in those first few weeks after the island rose, after the earthquakes and tsunamis that devastated coastlines and erased cities on both sides of the Pacific. Quakes measuring 9.9+, possibly one or two as strong as 12.0, exceeding the parameters of Mercalli-Cancani-Sieberg scale. Quakes so strong they broke apart the atomic structure of stone. She remembers watching on CNN and MSNBC, the floods, the fire, the few blurred, grainy bits of footage that were ever filmed of the coast of R'lyeh before there were no longer any ships left to sail the bruised-black seas. Susannah even recalls an interview with two physicists who attributed the inability of video to capture clear footage of the island's titanic monoliths to the bending of light rays by the angles of poorly understood geometries and "physics beyond the standard model." Her dad had said it was all a load of crap, that no one had any idea what was happening, and she's inclined to agree with her dead father.

New Horizons returned, ignoring its programming and using Pluto for a gravitational slingshot back towards the inner Solar System, hurtling across near vacuum and cold and all those millions of miles back to earth. The probe crashed somewhere in the Sahara, or the Caspian Sea, or Scandinavia. No one was ever certain, as tracking stations seemed to show it coming down in multiple locations.

But it returned with secrets, and the scientists could grasp at straws forever and never have one iota what those secrets were.*New Horizons* returned, and R'lyeh rose, and the one sleeping there awoke.

And The End began.

Or the Beginning.

Susannah remembers those grainy clips, played over and over until all the channels all went off the air, and her family joined the steady stream of refugees heading inland. She even recalls the final broadcast, and what emerged from those strange angles into the light of day. Just a distorted hint of its impossible bulk glimpsed between crackling bursts of static. She remembers the screams.

She asked questions that her parents would never answer, but she had the TV and Twitter and Facebook, while they lasted. All the contradictory reports, the events that were only explicable if one were willing to believe the inexplicable. News of the friends and family who died or simply vanished. So many people vanished so quickly there was no way to keep track. Here one day, gone the next. Here one hour, one minute, then poof.

The conspiracy nuts, fringe theorists, and pseudoscientists had a field day, their fifteen minutes in the sun. It was their moment to shine, because, obviously, this was all the result of top-fucking-secret black-ops NSA DOD ESA CIA NASA acronym, acronym ancient astronaut Roswell Area 51 chemtrails secret electromagnetic directed-energy weaponry cold goddamn fusion and strangelets spawned by the Large Hadron Collider and, and, and HAARP program disruptions in the ionosphere and the ghosts of John F. Kennedy, Nikola Tesla, and Madame Blavatsky. They all ran together just exactly like that in Susannah's mind, like melted steel. Naturally, the religious end-timers got a word in edgewise. This had to be the Rapture, the Second Coming, the opening of the Seven Seals, what the hell else could that thing that crawled forth from the New Land be *but* the Antichrist?

There were a few who went so far as to propose that *all* conceivable claims were true. They embraced.

Five years farther on, in the ruins of Babylon, she and the Elmwood kid sit in the pillbox. She watches, and he reads. At precisely 13:00 hours a "squadron" of the blood-red driftgliders appears to the south, swooping low above No Man's. They shimmer wetly, those wings a hundred feet from tip to tip, those insectile heads, the tails that trail out behind them throwing blue-white sparks of electricity. Minutes later, there's the dull *whup-whup* of a modified National Guard UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter. It goes as near to the driftgliders as it dares, but never engages, never opens fire.

She watches it all through the binoculars. The Elmwood kid only looks up for a few seconds.

At 15:07 something on towering stilt legs strides through the mushroom forest. She reports it, but HQ O'Hare says it isn't a clear and present danger. Just neofauna. But she notes the walker in the logbook, anyway. Susannah even sketches a decent likeness of the creature. It calls out across the wastes with a cry like all the foghorns ever built. Maybe it's lonely and looking for a mate. Maybe it's praying. She isn't curious enough to ponder the problem for very long.

"That's it for me," the kid says at 16:55, even though they won't be relieved for another twenty minutes. "There's meatloaf tonight," he says and grins, tucking his book into a pocket of his coat.

"How can you eat that shit?" she asks. It comes heavy on the loaf and light on anything that can be called meat, just enough Spam or Vienna sausage to create the illusion, and all the rest grain and Crisco filler from the rapidly dwindling stores.

"Gotta eat something," he replies. "There's worse. Then again, maybe you ain't never been down that low, Sue. Maybe you never were a scrounger before your paperwork went through and you got the wall."

And sure, that's true, though she doesn't like the tone in the Elmwood kid's voice when he reminds her. She waited out quarantine in the camps, then pulled various shit civil service and Army duties before finally rising up the ranks. All she had to keep her sane was ambition. That and her own secrets, which she will never share with the Elmwood kid. Even without the infection, even if she had all the time in the world, she'd never share those secrets. *New Horizon* had its mysteries, and Susannah has hers, which are even more secret than the probes because no one suspects that she *has* secrets.

She doesn't let the kid leave early.

Technically, Susannah bunks with the other members of the Guard in the barracks at the converted State Street Subway tunnel. That's what her ID badge says, and that's where she takes most of her meals. But she isn't the only person who seeks other lodgings from time to time. Her rank gives her a freedom of movement not afforded to civilians. The curfews don't apply, and she has very little trouble at checkpoints.

The stingy luxuries that keep people at their posts, gazing out across the horrors of No Man's Land.

Fringe benefits.

Susannah has claimed a basement room below what once was the Biograph Theater. Dillinger was shot dead just outside the theater, way, way back before. But some people still remember that. A lot of people squat in the derelict movie palace, and sometimes there are gatherings and meetings of one sort of another that use the stage. The squatters don't ever seem to mind. It's something to break up the grinding tedium here at the end of the world. But none of the Biograph's other inhabitants or occasional interlopers ever fuck with Susannah. She's painted the Mark of the Guard on her rusty steel door, and that keeps them away in droves.

There is a second mark, down low. Bottom left-hand corner, near the hinges that creak and strain every time the door is opened and closed.

A mark no larger than a dime.

It's another secret in a the dregs of a world that has all descended into secrets. If military intelligence could ever learn this secret, then the city might stop rotting from the inside out. A drop in the bucket of the tide might be turned. Might. It's the sign of the Eyes and Mouths and Hands of the Black Pharaoh. He has many names, many titles, but that's the one Susannah prefers, even if she can't say why. Perhaps because so many of the others are all but unpronounceable. She used a Swiss army knife to carve the symbol there herself, almost two years back now, after she first glimpsed the tall, dark man lingering in the doorway of a burned-out house in Sheridan Park. He saw her, as she saw him. He looked into her, and she glimpsed the thinnest rind of the truth of it all. Just the oily scum floating on the surface, but that was more than enough to seduce.

Now she is among the hundreds in the city who have answered his call, and that seems a far, far greater purpose than numbering among the paper tigers who go through the motions of watching over the ignorant, the unseeing, the souls just counting off the days until deaths or fates much worse than death. Unlike them, her existence has *true* meaning, even if only a shred.

There isn't much to her room below the stage. A few pieces of furniture she dragged in down the stairs: an old office chair, a loveseat upholstered in tatters of mildewed linen, a television set that was already there when she claimed the place, a hotplate, an Army cot, a wobbly table (one leg's too short) heaped with books and unbound pages and a ceramic coffee cup filled with pens and pencils. One side of the cup has the glowering face of a red bull printed on it and THE CHICAGO BULLS. The horns of the bull form the U in BULLS. The only light comes from the stubs of candles that she hoards, and that she only lights when she needs illumination. Most of her time here is passed in complete darkness.

As, Susannah knows, is appropriate.

The ceiling is low enough that she can reach it by standing on the Coleman cooler she scavenged from the ruins of a sporting-goods store. And there on the cement ceiling is the place that she's creating her celestial map, which is, of course, more than a mere map. When it's finally finished, at that undisclosed but nonetheless appointed hour, it will also be a hole.

That word, *hole*, is entirely inadequate to describe what she's slowly, slowly, slowly fashioning. Just as all the names and epithets worn by the Black Pharaoh are entirely inadequate. In her mind, she can see what she's making, piecemeal, on the ceiling, because He showed her.

Hole.

Breach.

Tear.

Whatever.

When she left the wall, she and Elmwood boy going their separate ways until next week, she went to her hiding place below the Biograph. She sits on the loveseat, trying to ignore her itching, infected hip, and listens to the ticking of the alarm clock, which she also keeps on the wobbly table, perched atop a crooked stack of books capped off with *Quantum Mechanics and Experience*. She's always careful to wind the clock whenever she leaves the room below the stage, checking it against the wristwatch supplied by the Guard. She listens and waits impatiently. In the darkness, it's easy to lose track of time. The tick, tick, ticking of the clock seems to do more to blur moments than to delineate, and so she sometimes wonders why it's so important to her to keep it wound. But eventually she hears heavy, shuffling footsteps coming down the corridor. They stop just outside the room, and then there's a protracted moment of silence before the faint, dry sound of an envelope being slipped beneath the door. Sweating, her heart pounding, almost too anxious to breathe, she waits until the footsteps have retreated back the way they came before she lights the candle.

It's an envelope sealed with a few drops of yellow wax stamped with the same mark scratched at the bottom left-hand corner of her door. Susannah crouches over the envelope, almost reluctant to touch it, even now, when she can no longer recall how many times this ritual has been repeated. It isn't necessary to hold a thing in one's hands in order to recognize the significance with which is has been imbued. She reaches down, her fingers no more than an inch or two above the paper, but she hesitates. Susannah suspects that they all hesitate, the ones who have seen the Black Pharaoh and been chosen to receive these significant messages sealed with yellow wax.

"Do you mean to wait all night?" a voice whispers from a corner of the room, an inky spot where the unsteady flame of the candle isn't reaching. But Susannah knows that the candlelight wouldn't brighten that corner even if she walked over and stood there. Something in the corner is immune to light. She isn't sure if that something was there when she found the room, or if it followed her. She isn't sure if all the disciples have black corners and voices that speak to them from black corners.

Still crouching, Susannah looks over her shoulder, peering at the corner even though she knows there's absolutely no chance of seeing who or what is there.

"When I was seven," she says, "we took a vacation to Yosemite, a camping trip. It was summer, and I lay on the hood of the car. Just me and my father, staring up at the stars. He would point to one and tell me its name. What astronomers called it."

"Astronomers were always arrogant fools," the voice tells her, "thinking they could name a star."

"I'd never seen anything like it. The whole sky seemed bathed in white fire. The Milky Way stretched from one horizon to the other."

And, she thinks, the sight of them absolutely fucking terrified you, though you never told Dad that. You wanted to crawl beneath the car and hide there until sunrise when there would only be that one familiar star, close and warm.

She says, "He pointed out the specks that were Mars and Venus and Jupiter."

Susannah can hear whatever speaks to her from the corner smile. It smiles in a way that can *be* heard. "Be grateful to his memory, then. He paved your way to glory. He set the stage that night."

"He taught me about the speed of light," she replies, even if it isn't a proper reply. "He told me a lot of those stars had died billions of years before we looked up and saw them."

That was the first night she understood how small she was, how her only perfection would ever lie in her perfect insignificance in the face of all that universe stretched out above her.

"You should open the envelope," the voice says.

I wanted to crawl beneath the car and lie with my face pressed to the ground. That sky was hungry, and I expected that any moment I would fall up, up, up forever falling into its jaws.

"You'd not even be a crumb," says the corner. It knows the way into her head, so when it hears her thoughts and answers them she isn't ever surprised. "Doesn't mean the sky would spare you, but you wouldn't make a decent morsel. Heaven eats entire galaxies and is still ravenous."

Which reminds her of one of the last newscasts before there were no more newscasts and never would be. One of those foolish astronomers described the discovery of an apparent black hole between Saturn and Neptune. He talked about X-ray emissions, the event horizon, and accretion disk. He talked about the death of planets.

"There are no paths that lead away from the black hole."

The scientist might have said that, or it may only be a false memory.

The sky is eating us alive.

"The clock is ticking," says the voice, not meaning, specifically, the clock on the table. Meaning, of course, a clock so vast as to be inconceivable.

Her hip itches like hell, but she doesn't scratch it. She picks up the envelope and carries it to the table. She uses a thumbnail to peel back the sticky yellow wax, which smells very faintly of honey. There is an expensive-looking piece of stationery inside, folded over once. As always, the message has been composed in sepia, writing that looks old-fashioned, and Susannah always has imagined that the messages are each written out with an antique fountain pen.

Each man and woman who receives these envelopes has also received a key to a cryptographic code. No two of these ciphers are identical. She spent a week memorizing hers, then destroyed the ruled index card on which it had been written. Just for her. The Black Pharaoh speaks joyfully in an endless parade of languages learned from his father, and so he has one to spare for each of his chosen.

"You are a special snowflake," sneers the voice, and she tries to ignore it, but that works about as well as trying to ignore the prickling irritation where the fungus has taken root in her flesh. "You are a unique butterfly," laughs the voice.

Susannah reads the message over several times, and then several times more to be certain that she's worked it out precisely right. She isn't permitted to copy it down as she decodes the encrypted equations and stellar coordinates; she has to hold it all in her mind. Copies are much too dangerous when there are so many out there trying their damnedest to ferret out the servants of the tall, thin man who waits in doorways for lost sheep. And as soon as she's certain she's got it right, before she climbs atop the ice chest with blue Sharpie in hand, she has to burn it. Not after, which is why she has to be more sure than sure can be that she's made not even the most minute mistake. She touches one corner of the stationery to the candle's flame, and the paper catches and burns. She drops it onto the floor and waits until nothing remains but ashes. The whole floor of the room is carpeted in a fine grey layer of ash, smeared beneath her bare feet. She'll leave wearing ash. She always does.

"Your own moveable feast," the voice in the corner whispers. "Remember that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return."

Star dust.

"In the end," the voice reminds her, "not even that much will remain."

Susannah needs only fifteen minutes to copy the message onto the concrete ceiling. The Guard can hide inside their pillboxes and lob mortars at the demons who/that come too near the city. The jets and helicopters can fire their air-to-air missiles at the drift-gliders and the polyp clouds. The infantry can spray all the napalm it wishes. Let them. Because *this* is where the real offensive strikes of the war are being executed and carried out, in this dark, musty room and countless others like it all around the globe.

The tip of the marker squeaks as she draws lines to connect the dots between stars that only foolish men would try to name. She is laying a minefield. She is building a siege engine.

Susannah only *hardly* ever sleeps. If her insomnia were complete, that would be a mercy. Because even a woman touched by the hand of that tall, dark man to hasten The End, even such a woman as that, as Susannah, is not immune to fear. To terror. To dread. To be a whirlwind's concubine is not to be immune from the wind. And, long after midnight, when she has finished with the instructions delivered to her cramped room below the Biograph Theater, she extinguishes the candle and sits down to rest in the loveseat. She only means to get her breath, to clear her head, for the translation, transcription, then the act of laying down those new pieces of his stratagem has left her as drained as it always does.

But, there in the comforting arms of the darkness, thinking of the wall and No Man's Land, of the forest and the Elmwood kid, she slips.

She sleeps.

She dreams.

No one is spared in dreams.

There is no protective ward against the revelations riding on the double-helix of REM and NREM, spat up and out by the amygdala and limbic system to come crawling up from the recesses buried deep in the convolutions of grey matter. In her dreams, Susannah has never been *aware* that she's dreaming, never in all her life; that would be another sort of mercy. The worlds of her dreams—before and after the return of *New Horizons* and the sundering of reality—have always, always, always been as authentic as her waking world.

She walks along a boulevard that seems to have no beginning and no end. The shells of dead buildings rise up tall on either side of the street, and every empty window frame is another eye. Above Susannah, the sky seethes red with unopposed squadrons of driftgliders. The asphalt beneath her bare feet is sticky, as if it has either never cooled or is melting again. She's going somewhere, even if she could never say where that might be. She can hear distant artillery, the impotent booming of howitzers. But there is no one here to make a stand. This place, she knows, has fallen to chaos.

The itch from her infection is maddening, and has spread from her hip all the way down to her leg and across her belly. But she doesn't scratch, because that only spreads it faster, and she still has so much work to do before she joins the others in the forest.

"Is this the very last day?" she asks, uncertain whom she intends the question for and not expecting an answer.

"No," says a voice very close behind her. It sounds like her mother's voice, but she doesn't turn or even look over her shoulder to see. "No, Susannah. It's not quite as far along as that. On that day, the stars will wink out, one by one. Isn't that what you're doing when you draw on the ceiling? Erasing the stars?"

"Then there are still stars up there, behind the monsters?"

"Watch where you put your feet," says the woman who may or may not be her dead mother. "Watch your step. There are no maps here."

"No one repairs the roads anymore," Susannah replies.

And then she's come to a crucifix welded together from rusted steel girders, and hung there with coils of baling wire and with railroad spikes is the Elwood kid. He isn't dead yet. Like Christ at Calvary, he stares Heavenward, as though he might yet be delivered.

"No one's coming for us," she tells him.

There's a happy ring of ebony beetles dancing about the base of the cross, singing ebony beetle songs of sacrifice. She thinks about crushing them beneath her heel, all of them, so at least the boy could suffer in peace.

"We'll see," the Elmwood kid whispers through blood and a mouthful of broken teeth. "Nothing is certain. Ain't that the New Rule?"

"Nothing is new about uncertainty," she tells him.

His blood is the same color as the bellies, throats, and the under-sides of the wings of the driftgliders.

The Elmwood kid says, "I'll go for all of them, because there must be someone who will go for all of them."

"Who said that?" she asks the Hanged Man.

"I did. Just now."

"No. Someone said it before you."

And this is when she sees that there are dozens and dozens of other crucifixes—hundreds, possibly—stretching away along the boulevard before her. *This is,* she thinks, *the Road of Needles. The Road of Infidels.*

"Go away, witch," he says. "I'm dying. I don't want you to be here when I die."

She walks along the shore of the risen island on the very afternoon that it emerged, when it still dripped with the silt and slime of the seafloor. Heaps of hagfish, ratfish, brittle stars, and sea cucumbers squirm around her ankles, but she feels no revulsion whatsoever. Her back is to R'lyeh, with its warped spacetime and tortured geometry, that utterly alien architecture where the sleeper was imprisoned three hundred million years before the rise of mankind, as the continents slammed one against another in the birth throes of Pangaea and the first tiny reptiles scurried beneath the boughs of steaming Carboniferous jungles.

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.

No, sing that song no more. He is awakened.

A sanguine sea laps at the basalt shore.

The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

There are fleets of destroyers and aircraft carriers out there, the ships of war, bobbing like toys in a bathtub. Soon enough, the sleeper, no longer sleeping, will wipe them all away, send them straight down to the bottom of the ocean. The bombs begin to the fall, shat out of submarines and silos in China, Nebraska, Russia, India. The clock on a crooked stack of books in a concrete room below Chicago ticks, and then all the world is made of light and fire.

The fire is a path into cool shade.

Holocaust to blessed, perpetual gloom.

This is the day when gates open for Susannah, when the plague fungus has eaten enough that there's more of it than her. Now she only ever dreams of the gulfs out beyond Pluto and Charon. What's left of her brain is soothed by narcotic effects of the spores coursing through the sludgy remnants of her bloodstream. So there's no more pain. There will never again be pain. She goes to the forest with a dozen staggering others. She walks the shadowed lanes between stalks that would put redwoods to shame (if any redwoods still grew). And she finds her place among those who have come before her, a gaping wet vulvic nook in one of the stalks, and she allows that honeyed cleft to receive her. If this is Dante's Wood of the Suicides, William Blake's Forest of Self-Murderers, at least there are no harpies to tear at the bodies of the damned.

And there is peace in unity.

All wars end, even this last war. Even this wholesale massacre, as it can never truly be said to have been a war. As Mr. Wells wrote, "bows and arrows against the lightning." And many weeks later, many wax-sealed envelopes later, many

nightmares later, many turns at the wall later, on a Sighday the end of this war does finally arrive.

Susannah watches from the ramparts as the wave rolls across the land, crushing, obliterating, consuming everything in its path. The wave is as high and wide as the sky. It isn't a wave of water. It moves so slowly that there was time for news of it to reach the city days before it became visible, rolling in from the southwest. From, she supposes, the direction of R'lyeh. Of Hell. Some have fled the city, bound for the deserts that once were Wisconsin. But those refugees are few, a scattered parade of the last enclaves of Hope and Determination. They are the doomed unwilling to accept an impending fate, and so Susannah can only think of them as cowards. Better to stand here and bear witness at the conclusion of human history. The wave is a theater curtain drawing shut after the actors have taken their final bows and retreated to the wings. If asked, she would have to admit that the sight of it is not unwelcomed. After more than five years, almost a quarter of her life, Susannah is ready, and she has done her part to usher in this moment.

"It can't be real," the Elmwood kid whispers in a whisper that is more awe than terror. "Sue, It can't be real."

"It's real," she assures him. "Few things have ever been more real than that."

He raises his left arm and points towards the place where the horizon used to be.

"Nothing can be that..." But then he trails off.

"In its way," she says, "it's beautiful." She stands, moving in an effort not to scratch at the welts and boils and spongy tissue that has spread from her hip across her belly, between her legs, up her entire back. In the old days, no one with such an advanced stage of the plague would ever have been permitted to remain on the wall.

But beggars can't be choosers.

The wave oozes forward, rolling inch by inch by inch.

Her final envelope simply called it Shuggoth.

Despair, for by your hand comes the annihilator even of time, and those once rebels who were legion have been made whole and imbued with inconceivable intent, and the name placed upon it is Shuggoth.

The Black Pharaoh has allowed her to play a role in this extinction. The lines, angles, and remaining interstices marked off on so many secret walls within the city, they are all, in their way, midwives and heralds of the wave. As a reward, those who crafted them will pass from the cosmos, or, more accurately, into the post-cosmic void, with some small part of their dignity intact. Of course, this gift is a subjective perception and nothing more; the star-born harbingers of oblivion—conceived outside the quantum-foam cradle of this universe—offer no gifts, no favors to the faithful.

No one mans the howitzers. No jets are scrambled for a closing show of defiance. There is not even panic in the streets. The people who have remained in

the city have accepted what is coming, and now there is only the waiting. They have a few more hours at the most.

The Elmwood kid points at the sky now. When Susannah looks up, she can see that the stars are winking out, one by one.