

JEFFREY FORD

SOMETHING BY THE SEA

MAGGIE RAN AHEAD OF HIM down the path in the failing light, the sleek gray whippet, Mathematics, moving gracefully at her side. Her Uncle Archer came hobbling slowly along behind with his cane, a picnic basket draped over one arm.

"Watch that tree root at the turn," he called, "it will try to grab your ankle."

Her laugh came back to him and he smiled.

It was a warm twilight of sudden, billowing breezes that rushed through the leaves and made the boughs sway. Night was mixing quickly into the last faint glow of red, filling the woods with shadows. Off in the distance could be heard the calm and methodical heartbeat of the ocean, while closer a night bird sang melancholic, trilling its low whistle from within a tangled thorn bush.

He rounded the bend in the path and beheld his niece -- powder-blue pajamas, pigtailed, and bare feet -- standing uncharacteristically still, head cocked back, and gazing at a firefly floating erratically midway between her nose and the rustling green canopy above.

"Look, Uncle Archer, the first one of the night," she turned and said when she heard him behind her.

"There will be more," he said. "Soon they'll all be out and we'll have to put on dark glasses."

"Silly," she said matter-of-factly and continued on her way. "Come, Math," she called back to the dog.

The path meandered for a quarter mile through the woods, and by the time they reached the observatory, as Archer called the small clearing, they had only the Moon and fireflies to light their way. Two fan-backed wicker chairs and a low, glass-topped table were there waiting for them. Archer put the picnic basket down on one of the seats and drew back its leather cover. From within, he retrieved a candle and placed it on the table. Leaving his cane propped against the arm of the chair, he stepped uneasily over to the trunk of an oak tree at the boundary of the clearing.

Maggie took her uncle's arm and steadied him as he unwound the cord that, at their end, was twined around a cleat driven into the trunk and, at the other, looped up over the one branch that jutted out above the furniture. Once the line was clear, he released it slowly, a handful at a time, lowering an orange globe the size of a beach ball from where it had hung, up near the sheltering branch. When the lantern had descended, twirling and swaying, to a foot above the table, he rewound the extra cord around the cleat.

"Can I light it?" she asked as they moved back to where the orange ball swung. "Absurd," said Archer, reaching into his vest pocket. He took out a cigarette lighter that had the form of a derringer. "You can get the hatch, though," he told her.

Maggie climbed upon the other chair and, reaching for the globe, unhooked the curved panel that opened on delicate hinges, while her uncle shot a spark of flame at the wick of the candle. "Hold it still, now," he said, and she steadied the lantern. He carefully fitted the candle into its place inside the globe and then closed it. A warm glow filled the sphere and radiated subtly throughout the observatory.

"Hoist it," he said to her and she did the honors at the tree, unwinding the cord from around the cleat. As she slowly pulled back on the line, she watched the rising lantern and thought of it as a miniature sun, and then a soul. When she had the line secured, she turned back to her uncle, who had taken from the picnic basket a folded quilt that he was just then unfurling. She stepped forward as he held it up in front of him like a bullfighter's cape. "Madame Margaret," he said. When she was before him, she turned her back, and he

draped the cover of a hundred different textures and colors over her shoulders.

A queen in a procession, she marched to her chair and, with the blanket wrapped around her from her neck to her shins, sat back onto her throne. Mathematics curled up at her feet, and she rested the soles of them lightly, one on his rib cage, one on his haunch. Archer placed the picnic basket on the ground next to him, seating himself in the chair. Leaning over, he then took from the basket a thermos and two glasses, and what appeared to Maggie to be a tall, slender-necked vase ending in a kind of cup, with a base like a bulging belly etched in a flower motif. There was a thin hose attached to one side that tapered into a nozzle.

"Is that a magic lamp?" she asked him.

"Sort of," he said, as he opened the thermos. He poured her a glass of tea and then lifted the top off the odd contraption and poured some tea inside it as well. Fitting the bowl top back in place, he said, "It's called a hookah, or a narghile."

"Does a genie come out when you rub it?"

Archer laughed. "This part here," he said, pointing to the bowl at the top, "is called the lule." His finger then moved to the neck. "This is the marpuc," he said. "The govde," pointing to the body. "And this is the agizlik," he told her, and put the end of the nozzle momentarily into his mouth to test its draw.

Maggie leaned forward to take her glass of tea from the table, and her uncle thought he caught a glimpse of what she would look like when she was older. There was an expression of seriousness in the brow, a slight indication of uncertainty around the eyes that he feared would become more pronounced with time.

"The narghile should always sit on the floor or ground," he said to her. "That is proper etiquette, but I am too old and crippled to sit down there with my legs crisscrossed like a pretzel."

"What does it do?" she asked, lazily reaching out for but missing a firefly that passed by her head.

"For smoking," he said. With this, he lifted his cane and twisted the onyx crow's-head handle, which came away from the stick in his hand. Very carefully, he moved the ornament over the top of the hookah and tilting it, watched as a fine dark powdery substance fell in grains from a tiny hole at the end of the beak, filling the water pipe's bowl.

"Can I try it?" asked Maggie.

"You are too young," he said as he reattached the black head to the cane. "I need the smoke sometimes to keep my internal engine running, to, as they say, get up a full head of steam. You have all of the energy you need. Besides, the smoke teaches contemplation and patience, and it is a child's job to be impatient."

"Is that tobacco like what my father puts in his pipe?" she asked.

"Hardly, my dear. This is the house blend, the recipe of sultans mixed with perfume and crushed pearls."

"What's inside a pearl when you crush it?" she asked. "A yolk?"

"No," he said, "that's an egg."

"What?"

"Something," he said and pulled the trigger on the derringer, lighting the contents in the bowl until it began to smolder. He pocketed the lighter and then lifted the nozzle at the end of the hose to his mouth. For the duration that he drew in, Maggie sipped her tea. Its flavor was a mix of orange and peach and some other soothing ingredient. She imagined she was drinking the glow of the lantern.

Archer exhaled slowly, and the pale violet smoke grew up into the night from his open lips like the ghost of a vine, spiraling, knotting, nearly taking the form of a blossom before dissipating.

"Where's the telescope?" asked Maggie.

"There is none," he answered.

"But you call this the observatory," she said. "I thought that was a place where you looked at the stars."

"Precisely," he said, took another toke, exhaled, and then leaned back in the chair with a faint smile.

"They will be coming for me tomorrow," she said.

"I'll be sorry to see you go."

"Will you bring Math with you and visit us in the city at the holidays?" she asked.

"Perhaps."

"Yes," she corrected. There was a pause and then she asked, "Do you think my parents have been arguing while I've been away?"

He had meant to tell her, "Of course not," but instead he heard himself saying, "I don't know."

"My father is going to leave us," she said. "Mother told me he might."

"Well, let's wait and see what happens," he said. "And while we are here, I believe I promised to tell you a story, one that you will remember until next summer."

"Tell me one that will make me remember the beach and you and Math even when it's dark and snowing. Something by the sea, please," she said.

He leaned forward to relight the bowl of the hookah. This time as he drew on the nozzle, she peered through the dim light at him, studying his features -- long beard, thinning hair, high forehead, and round cheeks with a scar across the right side -- in order to commit them to memory, like a photograph for her mind.

"I left home at a very young age," he said, his eyes closed, "and went to sea as a cabin boy on a large vessel out of Kelmore, bound for exotic locales, with the sole mission of capturing a strange creature for the garden zoo of a millionaire."

Maggie down put her tea and leaned back in her chair to listen, all the time thinking what a wonderful father the dog at her feet, Mathematics, would make.

"The name of the ship was The Mare, and it had three masts, three bright yellow sails, and a crow's nest. The figurehead was that of a wild horse with a mane of wooden flames and eyes made from what were rumored to be the two largest rubies in the world. Our captain was a fine old man named Karst, easygoing and just, who could split a proverbial hair with his tongue and a real one with a dagger at twenty paces."

Maggie pictured the wild horse, which melted into Math, who rode her on his back to school, made her hard-boiled eggs for lunch, and read stories to her at night next to the fireplace. She saw her mother, tears in her eyes, sitting at the kitchen window of their apartment in the city, staring out at the rain-washed streets while Math sat beside her, quietly, patiently, with his paw resting gently atop her forearm.

"The crew of The Mare was an odd and interesting lot, men who had spent so much time on the ocean that their eyes, no matter the color they were born with, had all turned blue, and their faces were like dark leather, cured over time by the Sun and salt spray. There was a man named Farso, who had once been a pirate and whose entire body was tattooed in aquamarine and rose with scenes of the war between Heaven and Hell -fierce angels and cunning demons battling with broadswords amongst the clouds, amidst the flames. On our first day at sea, he gave me the nickname Beetle, and it stuck to me the way the jagged legs of that insect fasten themselves to a sweater."

"Did he ever kill anyone?" asked Maggie, thinking of Math standing upright, with his concave stomach and ridged back, a long gray paw placing the shiny tin star atop the Christmas tree while her mother applauded.

"Farso?" said Archer. "I should think so, for he kept a cutlass in the sash that was his belt, the blade of which was stained red. I don't believe it was raspberry juice that had discolored the metal, if you catch my drift. One night, when we were becalmed in the Sea of the Dolphins, as we sat in the rigging of the main mast in the moonlight, he told me how he had witnessed the birth of a child in a tavern of Sechala, the pirate town of Peru. This

incident tipped the scales, and the war, the one depicted upon his flesh, between good and evil that had raged inside him since his own birth, was finally won by Life. He had only glimpsed the child for an instant, he said, but its wide eyes, taking in the new world around it, shot out an invisible beacon that bored into his heart and vanquished his fear of Death."

"We studied the oceans and seas of the world," said Maggie. "I never heard of the Sea of Dolphins."

"Am I to be held accountable for the state of education in these dry times?" asked Archer, pouring himself a glass of tea.

She laughed, as Math laughed beside her, at the antics of the marionettes on the stage of the puppet theater. The dog turned to her in the dark of the auditorium and whispered, "I know how to cure your mother's unhappiness, to dissolve her ghosts and sadness, for you know she is troubled behind her eyes."

"Insane," said Maggie, a word she had only recently learned.

"Quite," said Archer and then continued. "Another of the fellows aboard ship was Hustermann, a giant of a man who had never been granted the power of speech, but who could haul in the ship's anchor by himself. There were also the Fong brothers, identical twins from a village on the South China Sea, who had their own invented language of whistling with which they told each other secrets. A man from the frozen north, Kekmi, ate everything raw and went about without a shirt on even when we sailed through waters littered with icebergs. And there were others, a dozen or so, each as interesting as the next. These rough-and-tumble men, with muscles like rocks and dispositions like exotic creatures, who could not live for more than a year at a time on dry land, who had witnessed firsthand the treachery and wonder of nature, all treated me like a prince. 'Beetle,' they called me and, I suppose, saw in my innocence something they had lost and could never regain."

"Beetle," said Maggie. "I'm going to call you that sometimes."

"As you wish," said Archer. "But you might instead want to call me Collo, the name of the ship's mascot, a monkey from Brazil with a long tail and the refined human face of a leading man in the moving pictures, whose purpose in life was to make the crew laugh precisely when things seemed most grim. I remember a typhoon off the Cape of Bad Faith. We were all huddled below decks, the deafening sound of the storm above, screaming like the ocean itself was angry at us, and the jostling, the buffeting, the chaotic tumble as we all gathered around a single lantern, waiting to see if we were to live, or drown and lie forever, slowly rotting, on the slope of some undersea mountain . . . " Mathematics led her into the heart of the city, his narrow snout pointing the way through dark alleys, across the piazza, up and down great flights of steps. "What is it called?" asked Maggie. "The cure, what is it called?" The dog got down on all fours as they stopped by a fountain. "I cannot speak its name," said Math, "for then we will never find it. But, here, I will trace it in the water of the fountain with my paw and you will know it." The whippet leaned over the pool of the fountain and traced the name of the cure in his reflection. Maggie tried to read, to herself, the silvery trail of his design but did not understand. "Never say it," said Math as she became a monkey riding on his back through the long columned hallway of a museum.

"...but that damned primate was a card, I tell you," said Archer, laughing so hard he wheezed and coughed, using the index finger and thumb of his right hand to clear the tears from his eyes. "The spitting image of Randolph Mondrian in The Marble Lark, I tell you, especially when he combed back his monkey hair and employed his tail as a mustache." He took the bowl off the hookah and tapped it against the side of the table, clearing its charred contents. He then replaced it atop the water pipe and went through the process of refilling it from the crow's head.

"What about the exotic beast you were capturing for the millionaire?" asked Maggie as her eyelids began to droop.

Archer watched her yawn as he toked at the pipe. He slowly exhaled and said, "Yes, I have yet to tell you about The Mare's clandestine passenger, hidden in

a crate in the hold. We of the crew had heard only rumors of him, that his name was Chromonis and he needed no air or sunlight or water to survive, and that he was the perfect hunter."

"How many zeros in a million?" asked Maggie as her eyelids closed. She pictured the zeros as a string of pearls.

"Do you know a thousand?" asked Archer.

His niece nodded as if in a trance.

"Ten thousand?" he asked.

She tried to nod again and her head went down but did not rise.

"Use your mathematics," she heard him say and saw an image of the boot at the end of his crippled leg crush a clutch of pearls. A thick dark gas, like the ink of a squid, rose to envelop her momentarily in the aroma of the sultan's perfume. When she looked again, her uncle was asleep and Math had slipped out from under her feet. He stood on his hind legs by the opening to the path they had taken to the observatory.

"Quick, Maggie, we have so far to go," Math said and dropped to four paws. She wriggled out of the wicker chair and threw off the quilt. Passing Uncle Archer, she leaned over and lightly kissed the scar on his cheek. Then, with a skip and a bound, she was on the dog's thin back, her legs wrapped around his rippled rib cage, and they were dashing, with whippet speed, along the path. The night trees went by in a blur, and the wind in her face momentarily took her breath away. Math's haunches released like powerful springs long held back and, yelling to her, "Put your arms around my neck," he leaped into the sky. They touched down again in the field near the house and then with one more leap they were out over the ocean glimmering with moonlight, flying.

Archer was about to begin his story again when he saw that Maggie had dozed off. He loved to see her so peaceful, but hated to think of her in the clutches of anything as powerful as sleep, where he could not intercede. She looked so small in the wide-backed chair, wrapped like a cocoon in the quilt; so alone in the meager glow from above. The wind blew the leaves and the lantern swung, and he wondered if there was anything more he could have done to save her from the unhappiness that would overtake her the following day. It was true that her father would be leaving her mother, but what Maggie did not know was that she would be accompanying him because her mother would, by then, have been committed to an asylum for the insane. "Elise," whispered Archer, contemplating his sister and her ghosts. He pictured her tall, stately figure, her long black hair. She had been a kind and gentle mother to Maggie, but those spirits that only she could see, hounding her day and night, had made her dangerous to herself and others, for she believed the sole way to rid the world of them was with fire. The list of disastrous incidents was a catalogue of charred remains and close calls for the child.

The ghosts might as well have also haunted his brother-in-law for, through the years of trying to understand her madness, they had drained much of Havrad's personality, leaving him rather cold, haggard, and blank. Archer gave him credit for trying to effect some change that would save the child from any more time in the presence of true madness, but at the expense of a mother's love, it was not a real solution. Life was never so clear-cut as to offer anything as certain as a war between Heaven and Hell. That was for stories. As Maggie's crippled old uncle, he knew that all he was capable of was kindness toward her, and though many would think that enough, he felt its inadequacy tattooed in aquamarine and rose upon his conscience.

Archer refilled his pipe and smoked again. The house blend influenced his thinking, leading him clown a back alley of rumination concerning Elise's spirits. One was a fat old man, Grisby, with a long white beard and a ruddy face like Santa Claus, and the other a small, wasted child, a girl, Quill, with wide eyes and a pale, alabaster face. These two wraiths were always present, reminding Elise of anything that could possibly go wrong. She had told Archer that they spread their messages of gloom with such jolly sarcasm -- the possibilities of injury to her daughter, death for her husband, and war and famine and chaos for the world they lived in like some cosmic joke. At the

same time, they protected her from injury, for, as they admitted, without her they would not exist.

Mathematics slipped out from beneath Maggie's feet and came over to sit next to his master. Archer leaned back in the chair and stroked the whippet's smooth scalp. He closed his eyes and saw the fat old man and the child laughing uproariously. Those peals of mirth, at first cacophonous, soon began to flow like music and then like water, gushing down and all around as the fat man held his stomach as if to keep it from bursting and the poor girl pinched her nose with her fingers to hold her breath against the rising tide. Before he knew it, Archer was quite literally at sea. He lost his weak grip on the chair and was floundering, kicking his good leg and flapping his arms in an attempt to stay afloat.

A giant wave took him under, and he sank like a stone down into the depth of the ocean. "I'll drown," he said aloud and his words came as a torrent of bubbles. He did drown but was still somehow miraculously alive. After falling through sleep and miles of jade-green ocean, his feet touched the edge of an undersea mountain. When he kicked off with his good leg in a vain attempt to rise back to the surface, only his spirit ascended in the phantasmal form of his old body, which he left behind to rot on the craggy rock of the sunken precipice.

Then he was Beetle, scurrying along the deck of The Mare, heading for the prow at the insistence of Farso, who pointed into the clear sky. The rest of the crew, the Fongs and Captain Karst, silent Hustermann, Kekmi and Collo, all gathered behind the tattooed man and looked up to where his finger pointed.

"I see it," said Beetle.

"It's a girl," said the captain.

And so it was, a girl falling out of the sky.

Farso pulled off his shirt, leaped up onto the prow and then, taking two quick steps along the wooden horse's head and muzzle, dove into the sea. His muscled arms, one bearing the likeness of Saint Michael, one the visage of Beelzebub, cut the water as he swam with all his might to the spot where the falling girl hit the waves and sank like a cannonball. When he reached the vicinity, he dove.

"I hope she is all right," said Archer in the guise of Beetle. He was the boy, but still strangely aware of the old man he had been. Of two minds at once, he wondered at the odd happenstance of a girl falling from the sky and then at the oddness of being a boy filled with wonder.

The Fongs whistled shrilly and Hustermann brought a hand up to cover his roasting face, one eye peeking through splayed fingers. "Get the medical bag, Beetle," said Captain Karst. "Treatment might be in order."

Beetle ran back across the deck and then down the short flight to the captain's cabin. Archer worried that he might not be able to find the bag, but the boy spotted it sitting next to the globe and knew it immediately. By the time he had rejoined the others, Farso had the girl gripped in his left arm and was swimming on his back toward the ship. Hustermann climbed out over the side and hung down by a rope in order to take the girl from her savior.

She lay on the deck, eyes closed, water glistening on her in the sunlight as if she were a newborn baby. She wore a pair of powder-blue pajamas and her hair was twisted and fastened in the back into pigtails. Captain Karst called for the bag and removed its only contents -- a bottle of rum. His knees creaked as he knelt beside the girl and tilted the now-open bottle to her lips. A droplet or two of rum trickled into her, and then they waited. When, after a few moments, she did not begin to breathe, Kekmi, the man of the north, gently pushed Karst out of the way and took his place beside the girl. He leaned down over her and put his open mouth on hers. Collo, hanging by his tail from the rigging, looked down upon the group and clapped excitedly.

Nothing happened for close to a minute, and then Kekmi reared back and spat something small, black, and tentacled out onto the deck. Whatever it was tried to scuttle away, but the better looking of the Fong twins stomped on it, crushing it to a pulp. The girl opened her eyes and coughed. The northerner

lifted her and placed her in the captain's arms; he took her below decks, removed her wet clothing and wrapped her in a warm blanket. He and Beetle sat with her, feeding her hot soup, and listened to her explain how the dog she was flying on had turned into a string of numbers, mostly zeros, which were nothing. Then all that was left was a thin one, and she eventually lost her grip on it and fell.

Beetle told her she was safe and with friends. She smiled and asked where she was.

"On a ship in the Sea of Dolphins," said the captain. "You'll stay with us until we return to port and then we will find your mother for you."

"My mother?" asked the girl.

"Of course," said the captain. "Until then, The Mare will be your mother, and we will all be your father, except Beetle, here. He can be your brother. Come to think of it, Collo can be your doll, if you like." "I don't play with dolls," said Maggie.

"Just as well," said Karst. "I don't think the monkey would have liked it." The waves, the sky, the tropical breezes, and the dolphins always leaping, arcing up out of the sea that carried their name and plunging back to cut the water, marked the passage of time beneath the saffron-colored sails, appearing for all the world like the curtains in Archer's sunroom. Like some montage out of *The Marble Lark* -- there was Maggie, riding Hustermann's shoulders to the crow's nest as if he was a plough horse with a penchant for climbing; listening intently and learning in a single day the whistle code of the Fongs; taking cutlass instruction on the poop deck from Farso, who smiled, with three gold teeth, at his pupil's ingenuity; and watching Kekmi carve a dolphin out of whale bone.

Beetle lazed in the moonlight, twined in the rigging, thinking with his Archer-half about how much of the night remained back at the observatory in the forest. Off the starboard side, he saw a ghostly longboat pass, holding a miasmatic old man, fat as a barrel, with a white beard, and a wan, iridescent, young girl. They were laughing without mirth, in a sinister tone. The sight of the spirits frightened him and he closed his eyes momentarily. When he opened them, it was morning, and off in the distance he spotted an island. "Land ho!" he called in his Beetle voice, with his Beetle-half, and below, on deck, the crew crowded to the side of the ship to view the palm-lined shores and volcanic crest of Taramora.

"The home of Neptune's Daughter," said Karst.

"He has a daughter?" asked Farso.

"Does Neptune even exist?" asked Karst. "I believe he is merely an ancient myth. You see, if you were to take the ocean and pour it into the shape of man No, I am referring to the creature they call Neptune's Daughter. It supposedly haunts the sea caves of this island." "Is it pretty?" asked Maggie. "More horrible, I believe," said Karst. "With seaweed for hair and a blue and green mottled body. Slippery like a dolphin, but stalking around on huge webbed feet."

"Claws," said Kekmi.

"My friend is right," said Karst. "It cracks one's head like a walnut, with fangs as thick and sturdy as marlin spikes. Then it scoops out the brains and . . . you get the picture," said the captain, glancing down at Maggie and then back to the men.

"How do they know it's a girl?" she asked.

"They don't. Men named it," said Kekmi.

Collo, sitting on the captain's shoulder, batted his eyelashes and placed the back of his hand lightly against his forehead.

As The Mare approached the island, there was much commotion on deck, for the men were hauling out of the hold, with block and tackle, the large crate that contained the perfect hunter Chromonis. One of the indistinct crew, of the dozen or so whose faces and characters had yet to become clear, utilized a crowbar to pry open the front panel of the container. Its nails released their hold with a screech and the wooden wall fell forward onto the deck. From

within the darkness of the crate stepped a man, glistening silver, made all of metal.

The sun's bright reflection off the strange figure shot a beam into Maggie's eyes. This blinding light, combined with the frantic whistling of the Fongs, formed a whirl of flame inside the girl's mind. In the leaping patterns of that fire, she saw, played out, a tableau of her mother in the arms of her father. They were dancing to music performed on the keys of a tiny piano, each snowflake note like the sound of a crystal pin tapping a crystal goblet. She realized eventually that what she had mistaken for a fire was the flicker of a motion-picture projector and that her father was really the actor, Randolph Mondrian. And then Mondrian was, in fact, Collo, hair perfectly combed, pretending to be that leading man with the reputation for romancing starlets. They danced on and on, in tight circles, through light and dark until finally disappearing into a thick fog redolent of perfume and crushed pearls.

That night, after Maggie had retired to her hammock, the men passed around the bottle from the medical bag and listened, by torch light, to Chromonis recite the times tables in honor of the morrow's hunting. He stood tall and straight like an ambitious young student declaiming Horace. The reflection of the flames played upon his metallic skin, and his eyes, like rivets of light, never blinked. His copper lips did not pronounce words, but merely opened and closed like trapdoors, allowing words to escape, holding them back, straining some to make them squirm through as a means of emphasis. The numbers came and went, and one by one the crew fell into a trance.

Amidst the incantatory rhythm of arithmetic intoned with mechanical accuracy, like a molten rain upon the senses, Farso had a vague recollection of walking the plank in shark-infested seas off Zanzibar. Kekmi fell from the prow toward the gaping maw of a sperm whale. Karst recalled a monstrous typhoon on his tail in the Far Tortuga, but forgot if he ever escaped it. Hustermann felt his neck where the rope had once burned, and the Fongs did not whistle about the incurable fever they had contracted back in the Year of the Rat. Even Beetle had the tiniest whisper of a notion of a bullet to his leg, a cutlass across the face.

Through the fog-shrouded swamps of Taramora they slogged. Chromonis led the way, hand-in-hand with Collo. The moss-hung trees twisted in silent agony. The dark unseemly waters that swirled at their feet, the hunting calls of giant crows, and the death wails of diminutive green cats the size of one's fist that scurried along the branches, made Hustermann take Maggie upon his shoulders for protection. Like some pasha from her elephant castle, she scanned the shadowy landscape for a sign of Neptune's Daughter. In her hand she held a pistol, issued by Karst, that fired narcotic darts to tranquilize but not kill the creature. Farso walked beside her mount, whispering instructions to aim for the heart. Around them traipsed the other members of the crew, carrying rifles loaded with the same nonlethal ammunition. Beetle brought up the rear, hauling a rolled up fishing net over his shoulder. Tall Chromonis, sleek and proportioned as a statue from antiquity, stopped in his tracks, turned to face the others, and sniffed at the fog. His metal nose somehow twitched, his shining brow wrinkled, and he spoke mechanized words whose sound was not without its own gear-born beauty. "I smell a monster," he said.

Captain Karst looked over his shoulder, and then back to their guide. "Could you be more specific, sir?" he said.

"Very close," said Chromonis.

"Where?" whispered Karst.

The water at their feet exploded, and up from the mire came an enormous form, a head taller than Hustermann. It shook the mud from itself, the long strands of seaweed hair flinging wet globs of it in the faces of the hunting party. A green-blue form, slick with wet earth, as if the Earth itself had come to life, leaped upon Chromonis and, with one deft swing of its muscled arm, knocked the perfect hunter's head off in a graceful arc to land spluttering in a puddle. Gear work and springs, parti-colored wires and sparks, sprayed from

his chrome neck. Maggie was the first to shoot, but her trembling aim succeeded only in wounding both Karst and Collo. As Neptune's Daughter lunged into the pack of sailors, moving with the grace and speed of a dolphin through deep water, more rifles were fired, more errant shots finding human targets, until all save the girl and Beetle had been hit.

Collo curled into a ball of sleep. Farso half-heartedly reached for his cutlass, but was unconscious before he hit the damp earth. Kekmi twitched once and slumped down. The Fongs' whistling turned to snoring as they locked in an embrace and remained upright, a twinly dozing triangle. Hustermann pirouetted three times, already dreaming of home and the dance lessons he had been forced to take as a child. When his huge body succumbed to the drug, he fell over like a sack of potatoes. Maggie screamed as he fell, but the creature grabbed her off his shoulders. Beetle watched from his hiding place behind a tree as Neptune's Daughter carried the girl away into the terrifying shadows of the swamp.

The boy wiped his eyes and came out of hiding. He threw down his net and whistled once, twice, not to the dreaming Fongs but for his friend.

Mathematics flew down through the trees as if on a wire in a stage play, his left front leg curled for the descent, and landed next to his master. The dog sat and waited while the boy strained and, with much internal fortitude and a good deal of grunting, transformed himself into the elderly Archer. He knew full well that in this form he would be crippled again and that his cane would be of little help in the swamp, but with grim determination he stuck its end down into the shallow water and set off in search of his niece, the dog following at his heels.

On a beach inside an ocean cave, whose mouth stared out to sea, lit only by the rays of the setting sun streaming in from the horizon like the faint glow from a lantern, sat two figures on thrones made from dry, woven seaweed. A table, made from the same vegetal effluvia of the ocean, was arranged between the chairs, and upon it set a tortoise shell of sea tea and a huge sand-dollar platter holding fancy jelly and starfish. Neptune's Daughter sat with her back to the cave wall, and Maggie with her back to the small wavelets that broke upon the beach.

"The tide is rising," said the creature in a fair voice. She leaned over and poured two nautilus shells of tea. She handed one to Maggie.

"Will you crack my skull like a walnut?" asked the girl.

"Perhaps metaphorically, my dear," she said, smiling grimly through her overbite.

"When you eat a brain, what does it taste like?" asked Maggie.

"Bittersweet," said the creature, staring into the distance, trying to find the right explanation. "Bittersweet. The knowledge goes down rough and offsets the confection of ideas. And then the memories. The memories burst upon the tongue, bubbles of longing and regret, and the entire repast leaves you tired but wanting more."

"Why have you taken me?" asked Maggie, sipping at her tea.

"We are waiting for your uncle. He will be here shortly."

"What would your own brain taste like?" asked the girl.

"Like fire, child," she said. Her claws had shrunk simply to long nails, and the ocean shades of blue-green that had camouflaged her body were softening into pink. Neptune's Daughter was now less a monster and more a woman with dark hair mixed in with the seaweed locks.

"Are you changing?" asked Maggie.

"Look," said her hostess, "here he comes now."

Maggie stood and turned around to see a small figure slogging, waist deep, through the white water at the mouth of the cave. Uncle Archer's journey through the incoming tide, through the rays of the setting sun, seemed to take forever, yet took no time at all. Her heart leaped for joy at the prospect of rescue. Only when Archer neared the shore did Math emerge from beneath the water's surface-- first the ridge of his back and then his snout.

"Let your uncle sit down for a moment," said Neptune's Daughter to Maggie.

"And you come and sit on my lap."

"I don't want to," said Maggie.

"Now, now, do as you're told or I'll rip his face off," cautioned the creature.

Archer, out of breath, nodded to Maggie, motioning with his cane for her to do as she had been told. He walked unsteadily, leaning his full weight at times on the cane, to the empty seaweed chair and sat back into it. Mathematics took up a position at his side. He leaned forward for a minute, regulating his breathing, and took a handkerchief from his damp tweed jacket with which to mop his brow. "That water is frigid," he said, shaking his head.

Maggie sat very still on the lap of Neptune's Daughter, feeling as she did sometimes when she was home alone with her mother and smelled the first hint of smoke. The creature wrapped her wet hand around the girl's neck from the back and applied light pressure. "Now, Archer, tell the child the truth or"

He hung his head, closed his eyes, and began speaking, unable to look directly at them. "When I was young, I went to war against the sultan of an eastern land. I was filled with foolish courage, with bravado, until one day in a skirmish at Taramora, I was wounded in the leg. The bullet shattered my shinbone. An enemy soldier leaped into the pit where I lay, writhing in pain, and brought his cutlass down to skewer my head. A friend of mine, a mathematics professor from Kelmora, John Farso, shot the enemy just as the blade was biting into the flesh of my face.

"Farso, mortally wounded himself, dragged me to safety back to our battalion. I spent the better part of a year on a field hospital cot, screwed to the cosmos on morphine for the pain. It was during that time, at night, when those who were not dying slept beneath the big tent, that the ghosts first came to me -- the old man with the beard and the girl with the wide eyes. At first, in my delirium, I thought they were real-- good Samaritans helping the wounded. Then one night the girl walked through the man as the man walked through my cot, and once I was aware of their nature, their ill intent became clear to me.

"Another soldier, who had occupied the cot next to mine for a brief time before dying of infection, also saw them. He told me the story of a millionaire and his daughter who had come to the war-torn land of the sultan to sell guns to both sides. They lived in a splendid house in Taramora. The millionaire was not there long before he became enamored of the pleasures of the hookah. He succumbed to the sultan's special recipe and went mad, thinking he was haunted. One night, mistaking the girl for one of his ghosts, he shot her with a derringer he carried in his waistband. When he came to his senses and saw what he had done, he took his own life.

"I was sent home from the front to recuperate, but they followed me. Even on the most beautiful day, out in the sunshine on a green field beneath the swaying boughs of an oak, they made themselves known. My sister, Elise, cared for me, brought me back to full health, save my limp and scar. I told her about the spirits, and in order to allow me to grow strong, she said she would take them from me for a time. We cut our thumbs and mixed our blood on the deal."

"But you never took them back," said Neptune's Daughter.

"They would not return to me, Maggie, I swear," said Archer, tears in his eyes.

"You know the reason they would not return to you," said the creature. "Tell the girl your secret, the thing that protects you," she demanded, raising her voice so that it echoed through the cave.

At that moment, the breaking wave at Archer's back crashed upon the beach and Collo came leaping out of the water. In three incredible bounds he was across the sand and in the air. He landed on the creature's face, wrapping his arms and legs around her head and biting into the smooth flesh of her brow. For an instant, she released her grip and Maggie ran to her uncle.

Neptune's Daughter struggled to her feet, trying to pull the monkey loose, but

by then the others had risen from the water and were charging the monster. Kekmi, the Fongs, Farso, Karst, Hustermann, and the headless Chromonis bolted into the cave and knocked her back into her seaweed throne. She struggled wildly against the strong sailors' arms that held her down.

"Hurry," cried the captain.

Archer hobbled away from Maggie to the melee, reached into his pocket and took out the derringer. He leaned over and pulled the trigger, once, twice, three times, setting three small fires at the base of the seaweed chair. The flames jumped up as if he were lighting a pile of three-year-old tinder. "Maggie, come to me," he yelled and held his arms out as he returned to her. She ran, jumped up, and he caught her in midair. For a moment, he teetered, thrown off balance, and then he grunted and righted himself, hoisting her up over his shoulder. She saw Math pick up the cane with his mouth and follow.

As they trudged out through the ever-deepening water from the mouth of the cave, she looked back at the flaming pyre of crew and creature, a pulsating mass of burning flesh and steel. Violet smoke poured out of the blaze, filling the cave, but the only sound was that of twin whistles, twining, knotting, nearly becoming a blossom before dissipating.

Just before they submerged, she saw the whole chaotic inferno as a huge orange ball floating in the dark, and then the water came up, or they stepped down. Archer limped slowly, relentlessly across the ocean bottom, breathing bubbles like strings of pearls. Maggie saw lamprey wriggle in the lime-green light, herds of sea horses flit here and there all of one mind, toppled columns of a sunken palace, the sleek immensity of a whale passing a hundred yards overhead.

The movement of the water around them soothed her and made her weary. She reluctantly closed her eyes, knowing that what had happened had not been right. Already half-asleep, she looked one more time and saw the path through the forest at night. The wind was rustling the leaves. The lantern at the observatory receded in the distance. She hugged Archer tightly as he carried her back to the house.

In the morning the sun came up, round and bright orange. Out to the east there was a ship with three yellow sails on the ocean. Archer and Maggie stood in the drive as the girl's father stepped out of the shiny black car. He stood tall and rigid, little, if any, expression on his face.

"Come, Maggie," he said. "Say good-bye to Uncle Archie and let's be Off." Archer motioned to his brother-in-law to follow him, and then turned and walked away a few yards. Her father did as was requested and joined Archer out of earshot of the girl. Maggie watched intently, trying to overhear what was being said. At first, her father shook his head and said, "I can't." Archer brought his arm up and wrapped it around her father's shoulders. He leaned over and whispered in his ear for a long time. When he pulled back, his brother-in-law nodded.

"Get in the back seat, Maggie," said her father.

She did as she was told.

"But don't close the door just yet," he added.

She watched as Archer whistled and Mathematics came running from the back of the house. He petted the dog on the head and rubbed his ears. He then clicked his fingers at the height of his chest and the dog stood up on hind legs, resting both front paws against Archer's chest.

His master spoke to him quietly, and then said, "Go!"

The dog bounded over and leaped into the back seat with Maggie.

The car door closed. The car pulled away down the long drive.

Archer woke to the sound of the leaves rustling above the observatory. He leaned forward and removed the bowl from the hookah, tapped it against the side of the table and then fitted it back in place. Filling it from the cane head and lighting it, he considered his dream. As he took in the smoke, he had a vague memory of Randolph Mondrian in a comic pratfall scene from *The Marble Lark* and smiled. Across from him, the girl Quill sat, deep in sleep, wrapped in the hundred colors, while next to him, directly beneath the orange lantern,

the old man sat, his white beard rising and falling with his chest and enormous gut, napping like Santa the day after Christmas. Taking one more toke at the nozzle, Archer's reason sped off like a whippet through the forest. The exhalation, when it came, would be the violet yolk of a crushed pearl, and its sweet aroma would gently awaken his sleeping niece to the now darkened observatory, the last firefly, the wind in the leaves, and the snoring of her uncle.