

The Doom That Came to Smallmouth

Joe Murphy

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Illustration by [Douglas Herring](#)

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“I grew up in Texas, in a town not much larger (or stranger) than Smallmouth. It was there, as a high school student, that I got my first taste of H.P. Lovecraft. But Texas puts its own spin on things, especially when fishing is involved.”

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“He had a mighty Evinrude, a hundred different lures.”—Austin Lounge Lizards

THERE IS IN MNAR COUNTY a vast still lake fed by no stream, from which no stream flows. At least, that’s what Old Man Ackerman had told Rusty’s pa. Rusty had heard the old fart rambling about the tournament, and watched the gleam harden in Pa’s eyes.

“You know,” Rusty said the next day as he and Pa sat in their old pickup, staring out at the water beyond. “That Ackerman is a lying sack of shit.”

“Language, boy. Don’t talk about him that way.” A frown creased his father’s face, another deeply seamed wrinkle added to a thousand others. He reached across the ice chest and flicked Rusty’s ear with thumb and forefinger. “That old guy’s a serious fisherman.”

Rusty shrugged, then squinted in the bright Texas sunlight and studied what was supposed to be Smallmouth Lake. “Vast” was hardly the word, even for a nearsighted old cuss like Ackerman. Five skips of a stone would cross the whole damn thing. He could run clear around it and barely break a sweat.

But then again, “still” was an understatement. As they pulled up on the muddy shore beside an ancient hovel of a boathouse and a rotting pier that wouldn’t support his baby sister, Rusty cocked his head and stared. The lake, a perfect mirror, reflected the high thin clouds, washed-out blue sky, and a fireball July sun. Low-growing mesquite trees doubled into the water on the far shore. Even the dilapidated silhouette of Smallmouth proper, Mnar County’s only town, stood out near the western edge.

“That thing’s like glass,” Rusty said as Pa pulled the truck up next to two others.

“Like Ackerman said.” Pa turned off the engine and wiped the sweat from his

forehead beneath a battered Stetson. "Let's go check on the tournament."

"Do I have to?"

Pa turned and gazed at him with the eyes of a sad old hound. "Looky here, son. I know you hate fishing, but there's things you need to learn."

"But Pa!"

"This here's the only way I know to do it." Pa shook his head and got out. Rusty followed. A blue Dodge 4X4 with a pair of boots stuck out the window, the driver fast asleep, sat beside them. The other truck, a late model Chevy with a Bassmaster on the trailer, looked deserted. He followed Pa towards the battered boathouse. A faded sign above the door proclaimed "Smallmouth Lake Resort"

"Looks like Last Resort, if you ask me," Pa chuckled.

"Yeah." Rusty fought to keep the grin from his face.

A rusted screen door squeaked closed behind them. Cooler inside, the sweat on the back of Rusty's neck and beneath his thick red hair grew clammy. The small room they entered lay deep in shadow, the only light through a dirty window. A cowbell on the door clunked.

A shadow shifted on the counter. Rusty stopped in his tracks. The man behind the counter wasn't so much fat as droopy. Loose folds could have been either skin or cloth in the dimness, eyes that didn't catch the light but drank it down and held it prisoner.

"Help you?" The shadow asked.

"We're here for the tournament." Pa stepped up to the counter. "Guess we must be early."

"Not really." The shadow shrugged.

"Sign me up then," Pa told it.

"Tournament's full now." The shadow shook what might have been a head.

"But they's only two other boats out there," Rusty blurted. "How can it be full?"

"Sign-up starts at moonrise. Stops when the moon goes down." The shadow turned to Rusty, who could now make out the doughy face beneath a worn ball cap. "See a moon out there?"

“That’s crazy.” Rusty’s fists balled. “What kind of damn fool rules is that?”

“Language, son.” But Pa turned, leaned his elbows on the counter, and clasped his hands. Weathered face as blank as a mask, he studied the other man. “Ain’t no way to make an exception?”

“Can’t,” the man said.

“Wouldn’t the tournament work better with a few more entries?” Pa asked.

“Nope.”

“You one of the judges?” Pa asked.

“Yep.”

“That’s a shame,” Pa said. “Drove here all the way from Nacogdoches. Drove all night.”

“Shame,” the man agreed.

“Thing is,” Pa reached into the front pocket of his work shirt. “Got this brand new lure I was hopin’ to try. Pretty thing too. Three prong hook, and did you ever see such a shiny spoon?” He twiddled the lure; even in the close dimness its spoon caught the light, reflecting it back onto the other’s face.

Mud-colored eyes bulged softly in its glow, a gentle rhythmic flickering that matched the tempo of Pa’s words. “Wouldn’t anyone wanna try a lure like this? Wouldn’t anyone wanna try this tournament? Surely, surely there’s something you can do.”

“Surely.” The man’s eyes seemed to sink into drooping folds of flesh rather than blink. His voice turned soft and dreamy. “Surely there’s something I can do!”

“Sign me up then,” Pa urged, playing the light over the man’s face.

A thick stubby hand appeared on the counter, the man offering a clipboard with dirty yellow paper.

As they left the musty boathouse and returned to the summer sun, Rusty let loose a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

“That was wrong.” he looked up at Pa. The sun haloed his father’s head, leaving his face an impassive shadow. “You always said using Lure Light on another person was a bad thing.”

“True enough.” Pa put his hand on Rusty’s shoulder and sighed. “But a fishing tournament, even small as this one, is a serious thing. Sometimes, when you’re in a strange county, it’s the only way to handle the locals.”

Rusty shrugged. He gazed at the shamble of a pier, the impossibly round and still lake. Mnar was a different county, a lost place hidden in the dry West Texas dust. People might be different here, but like most folks they didn’t cotton to outsiders.

“Can I get a soda now?” He asked.

“After awhile.” Pa turned to inspect their boat. “We got things to do first.” Rusty scowled and shoved his hands in his pocket. Another weekend sacrificed to endless waiting, smelly old fish, and soul-deadening boredom. Fishing sucked, but it was the most serious thing in the world—especially for a luremancer.

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All sixteen of the Mnar All-School Band stood in a line beside the pier, tooting and banging their way through the most god awful rendition of “Texas Our Texas” Rusty’d ever suffered. Stuffed in uniforms that two thousand years ago might have been black, but now matched the shit brown of lakeshore mud, the band cackled and brayed into the last stanza, while a droopy collection of townspeople tried to clap in time.

“Where the hell’d they get them horns?” Rusty whispered as he stood beside Pa. “Ancient Babylon or someplace? Never seen the like of them.”

“Hush, boy,” Pa hissed. They both stood at attention, their hats over their hearts.

The band finished, or at least some did, and the rest just gave up. A drum majorette in a spangled costume made a last desperate effort to catch her baton, missed, and froze, pudgy hands on her plump cheeks as the baton bounced end over end and stuck itself in the lake. One rounded tip dripped green slime, its image perfectly mirrored in the water.

“Not even a ripple.” Rusty cocked his head.

“Well don’t just stand there.” Pa slipped his hat back in place. “Get it for her.”

“But the boat!”

“I’ll tend the boat.” Pa gripped his shoulder, brought his mouth close to

Rusty's ear, "Find out what the locals know about the fishin' here, if you can."

Muttering under his breath, Rusty slouched forward. He kicked the sneakers off his sockless feet and squished into the mud. A noise between a cry and a sigh breathed through the crowd as he eased into the blood-warm water. Feels like wading in grease, he thought. His fingers closed on the baton and he waded back, face burning from the multi-eyed gaze of the crowd. Two or three people clapped.

"Here you go." He offered the baton to the majorette, a girl perhaps a year or so older than his fifteen years. She smiled with a wide, flat mouth, tossed her dark hair, and came to meet him.

"That's right nice of you," she said, wiping sweat from a low-sloping forehead. She jiggled when she moved and Rusty appreciated that. The girl didn't have as much of a weight or posture problem as the other locals—almost attractive in a trailer park sort of way.

"You're welcome." He wiped his hands on his pants.

The townspeople had spread along the shore, hunkering down on blankets and tarps. Picnic fixings appeared. A charcoal stench tainted the air.

Murmured voices rose, the words somehow escaping Rusty as the first boat oozed into the water. Pa had backed the truck down to the shore. With a well-practiced jerk, their boat slid into the lake on its own.

"That's a pretty good trick," the majorette exclaimed.

"Pa's used to doing things by himself. I don't go with him unless I have to."

"Can't say as I blame you." A shiver shuddered through the majorette's chubby torso. "That fishing stuff gives me the creeps." Her sky blue, slightly bulging eyes, took in the lake and she shuddered again. "It sucks, don't it?"

"Fuckin' A," Rusty said, and watched her grin broaden.

"My name's Nya." The majorette glanced around, then cocked her head towards him. "You want a smoke?"

A thrill tingled through Rusty. Maybe this trip wouldn't be so bad after all. He glanced towards their boat; Pa had his back to them, fiddling with the poles and knee deep in the lake.

"Pa'll want me with him," he muttered.

Nya took his hand and squeezed it. "Bet he's like all the rest. Once he gets a

hook in the water he'll forget about you." She pulled on him. "Let's go."

Another glance and Rusty shrugged. Damn it all, he hadn't wanted to come. Maybe Pa wouldn't really care.

Maybe.

Nya pulled his arm again. "Come on, boy. I got half a pack and no one to share with. No one to share—anything." Her giggle sounded sweet with mischief.

"Well—okay."

Nya grinned and led him away from the picnickers, past a clump of mesquite, towards a weathered outhouse half hidden by thick stalks of wild sorghum.

Deep in the weeds, Rusty turned. Pa stood by the boat, staring at the picnickers, a hand extended past the brim of his old Stetson to shade his eyes as he searched the crowd.

"Down!" Rusty grabbed Nya's arm and pulled.

"Hey!" But Nya ducked, elbowed Rusty's ribs, and giggled.

For a heartbeat, Pa's gaze seemed to zero in; Rusty flinched, his father's sad disappointment thick and heavy as the summer heat. Then his old man shook his head and his gaze moved on. He climbed into the boat and started the motor. Without another glance, Pa gunned the old Evinrude and with a whoosh of spray, headed out.

Stupid old fart, Rusty thought. Fishing ain't everything. But he waited until the boat vanished into the lake's blinding glare before standing. They rustled further into the weeds and had just reached a weak shadow from a sickly knotted pecan tree when a soft cry rose from the folks on the shore.

"There goes the first one." Nya eased a crumpled cigarette pack from between her breasts. It took Rusty a moment to follow her gaze.

"What?" he finally managed.

Nya lit up, sucked in a ragged breath, and offered him a sweat-stained cigarette. "The first boat," she coughed.

Rusty took a puff and damned near choked. He stared at the lake. Only two boats remained. He squinted, just able to make out the Bassmaster and Pa's old flat-bottomed skiff. The air grew suddenly colder, the shadows deeper. "B—but where'd it go?"

“The Whiskered One drew first blood.” Nya shrugged and took the cigarette.

“Whiskered One?”

Nya’s words came distantly, through a sudden roaring as blood pulsed in his ears. He jammed his hands in his pocket so Nya wouldn’t see the shakes.

“Some call it The Lurker, others Deep Feeder,” Nya said. “But in the Elder’s Church we still call it Smallmouth. It’s the big one, what they’re trying to catch. But it’s always the other way around.”

Rusty stared at Pa, way out there, the lake impossibly huge now, his father only a dark speck on an endless mirror. With a breathless curse he started for the shore.

“Hey hold on!” Nya called, but then her voice faded into the laughter of those who watched and waited.

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“Damn that Ackerman. Damn him a thousand times.” Rusty stood beneath the afternoon sun, muddy toes barely beyond the lake’s reach. He squinted, trying to shade his eyes against the terrible glare that burned his face. He fought to keep sight of Pa, eyes stinging, sweat dripping. He shivered.

If I can just focus my will, Rusty thought. Like a true luremancer—watch Pa—guard him with my eyes, maybe nothing’ll happen to him—to us. Rusty’s fingers clenched until they ached. His legs hurt and he had to pee like a racehorse. Still he stood.

The lake glowed like molten gold, a dazzling light that hid the far shore, shrouded and engulfed the tiny boats, trapping them like flies in cloudy amber. Caught in that horrible brightness, Rusty realized, Pa wouldn’t see anything, let alone the other boat. He’d never know, never see the danger.

“I thought you’d be different,” Nya said behind him, her voice sullen. “Thought you weren’t like the others. You didn’t care nothing about fishing.”

“But he’s my pa,” Rusty said without turning.

“Shit,” Nya said. “He’s a fisherman, ain’t he? That’s all he cares about.”

“It’s important to him.” But what if she was right? All Rusty’s life he’d been dragged from one tournament to another: The Great Dallas Bass-off, The Conroe Catfish Roundup, The Galveston Grouper Grab, and even from fishin’ hole to cow pond as Pa delved deeper into luremancy. He enchanted hooks, raised undead

worms for endless bait, sought ancient secrets that endowed jigs with a fish's every desire. Rusty'd often tried to stay put with Ma at her gas station in Lufkin. Then Pa would appear from the summer mists, secrets gleaming in his eyes, with some fish story just as crazy as Ackerman's wild tale. Somehow, Rusty always gave in. Somehow, he always ended up hating every moment.

"You know, when I invited you for a smoke, I had a little more in mind." Nya softly touched his shoulder and then stroked his backbone. "You're a lot prettier than the boys round here."

"Thought I heard him call." Rusty pulled away from her. "You hear anything?"

A soft strange cry breathed through the crowd again. Somewhere a child cheered. The heat thickened, grew still as death.

"There goes the second one," Nya sighed.

Rusty blinked—couldn't help himself. His glance slipped from Pa's speck of a boat to search the lake. The Bassmaster had vanished. Desperately, he forced his gaze back to Pa.

"Won't be long now." Nya took his hand. "Then Smallmouth will go back to sleep and our town will be blessed for another year."

"Blessed?" He had to fight to keep from going blind in the glare. Rusty's head ached now, but that was nothing compared to the terrible emptiness in his gut.

"You know, prosperity and such. The wheat will grow, the cotton'll be thick and the farmers will get a good price." She took his arm, her breath soft and sort of fishy upon his cheek. "Hey maybe my Ma will take you in. You could live with us. Would you like that?"

Rusty swallowed. He couldn't bring himself to answer. After a moment Nya put her head on his shoulder, her arm snaking round his waist. It felt good. Even in the heat it felt good. He'd never had a girlfriend before. He couldn't help it when his mind drifted to the possibilities. What he and Nya could do, how they'd do it, all the little secret things that might happen if they slept in the same house.

"You do like me," she whispered. "Don't you?"

Rusty swallowed and nodded. The tiny speck of Pa's boat wavered and blurred lost in the glare.

"Course, you'll need to fight a boy or two." Nya leaned closer, her left breast brushing against his chest. "I'm the best looking girl in town. Everybody says so."

Why, at the Elder's Church, Parson Ib swears I look just like—”

Unable to stop himself, Rusty glanced down at her deep divided cleavage thrust tight in her sequined costume.

That long strange cry breathed through the crowd. Too late, he realized what had happened. He pushed Nya away, rushing into the water's grasp. His gaze searched the terrible empty lake.

“That's our cue.” Nya's voice grew hard behind him. Rusty damn near jumped when she shrilled a whistle.

“He's gone,” Rusty murmured.

“Course he is,” Nya answered. “You'd best get ready to go too.”

“I'm not going anywhere!” Rusty shouted. He whirled, fists balled. But already the band had reformed their line. Three sharp blasts of Nya's whistle and they warbled into ‘Happy Trails.’

The townspeople stirred, gathering up their blankets and tarps, the picnic over. They ignored Rusty as he stood there, rubbing his eyes. His fingers came away salty and wet. The shimmering glare grew duller, the lake smaller, the far side suddenly a few rock skips away. Rusty choked back a sob and turned. Some of the younger men had gathered round the pickups.

“Hey!” he shouted when a dumpy kid in a straw Stetson leaned in through the window of Pa's truck, as if searching for keys. “Hey that ain't yours.”

Rusty shoved his way into the group. A man just looked past him, sagging grin beneath droopy eyelids, and brushed him out of the way. Rusty tried to fight, but it weren't no fight. They didn't talk to him, didn't look at him, but just knocked him away as they hot-wired the trucks and drove off. Rusty fell to his knees, smacking the mud with his fists and bawling like a baby.

After awhile a battered station wagon, the last in a long line of cars, pulled up beside him. Rusty looked up at the mostly red wagon with a white door and green hood.

Nya leaned around a heavy set woman with droopy grey- blue hair and grinned at him through the side window. “Ready now? You want a ride into town?”

Slowly Rusty stood, fighting to choke down the sobs. He wiped his nose on his arm and then shook his head.

“Sure now, come on.” Nya waved him closer.

“Ain’t goin nowhere,” Rusty growled.

“Shit, boy.”

“Language, girl.” The woman pushed Nya back in the seat, turned to him, a smile crawling across her saggy lips. “You come to town when you’re good and ready, honey. We’re the brown house on First Street. Nya’s told me all about you.” The woman blinked, eyes receding into their sockets. “Won’t be the first outsider I’ve taken in.”

“Ma?” Nya’s mouth opened, a look of astonishment on her face. The car ground its gears and rattled on. Dust clouded around its rear wheels and covered him.

Alone in the sudden silence, he turned back to the lake, watched the line of cars as they snaked towards the town reflected in the motionless water. Alone, with nothing—hell he couldn’t even find his shoes. Pa was gone forever and ever.

For the longest moment in his life, Rusty stared at the lake. Why not walk into it and surrender? Let Old Whiskers take him down to Pa. He took a step, heard the sullen squish of mud. Things might be better this way, better for everyone.

Another step.

“Owww! Shit!” Rusty squawked and stared down at his foot. He’d stubbed his toe. A little tuft of skin, already bloody, had peeled off. The sun glinted on a battered metal box—Pa’s tackle box.

Ignoring the pain, Rusty squatted down, picked up the box, and hugged it to his chest.

“Pa,” he whispered over and over. “Pa.”

He opened the box carefully, realizing as he tugged at the latch that it didn’t feel right. Like any true luremancer’s, Pa’s tackle box weighed a ton; now it felt, well, light. He pulled back the lid, focused on the slots and little square trays. Instead of the Seven Sinkers of Cibola and Apache Ghost Bobbers the trays lay empty—all empty.

As he folded back the trays his breath caught in his throat. A single can of unopened soda, the cheap store brand that was all they could afford. A shudder wracked him and the tears started up again. His soda, that Pa had saved for him.

Rusty reached for the can, his fingers warm as they closed around it.

“Damn!” Rusty dropped the soda. The box fell and landed on his foot. But the real pain, the true pain throbbed through his bleeding finger. A hook had snagged him, and attached to the hook by a silver threader, a lure.

No, not a lure, he reminded himself. A jig, one he’d never seen before. The thing blurred, but not from his tears. The jig looked like some strange critter, something with tentacles, but neither squid nor octopus. Even as he studied it, the shape changed, blurred, and grew tentacles again.

Rusty forced his eyes up from the jig and gazed out at the motionless water.

“This ain’t over,” he told the lake. “Not by a damn sight, it ain’t.”

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A full moon, twice silver dollar size, cast greenish light over Rusty’s shoulder. He held his breath, took careful aim, and let the rock fly. The boathouse window shattered into a million full moons. Mindful of his bare feet and knees, Rusty hauled himself through the window and cautiously lowered his legs into a black abyss.

The place seemed brighter inside than when he and Pa had first arrived. Empty too, and locked up since everyone had returned to town. Rusty crept softly anyways, round the counter.

“Damn straight,” he whispered, grinning. Like every boathouse, the place stocked some fishing stuff. No poles, but he’d already found a good stout branch that would do the trick. Rusty picked up a spool of hundred pound test line and dropped it in his pocket. He climbed back through the window.

“What you doing!” A voice shrieked. Hands gripped him.

“Shit!” Rusty lashed out; his fist sank into something too soft.

“Owww, boy.” Blue eyes glinted as the shadowy figure fell back.

Rusty sucked in a gasp, fists still ready, and then recognized the shadow.
“Nya?”

“That ain’t no way to treat a lady.” She grinned. “Course, I didn’t come out here to be a lady.” Her hand lifted.

Rusty reached out took hold of her soft, soft fingers and helped her up. “You damn near scared the piss out of me.”

“Serves you right.” Nya brushed herself off. No longer in uniform she’d jammed herself into shorts and a halter top that showed more skin, more cleavage

than a truck-stop calendar girl. “Why didn’t you come by the house before dark?”

Rusty caught himself admiring the view, then forced a frown, and turned away. “Got things to do.” He found his fishing stick and started for the pier.

“Things?” Nya asked, hurried after him. “What things?”

The pier groaned as Nya followed him out on it. Rusty reached for the fishing line but stopped. His mouth fell open. He stared at the lake, a lake so huge the far shore lay shrouded in green mist. A lake so still a moon the size of a pickup lay trapped beneath the surface. A lake that caught the reflection of a vast city, towers and turrets of onyx and deep azure, walls that jutted at strange angles which made his eyes hurt.

“Purty, ain’t it,” Nya breathed beside him.

“What!” Rusty’s voice dried in his throat.

Nya took his arm, lay her head on his shoulder, her hair caressing his sunburned skin like a cool breeze. “Parson said that’s how our town really looks, but then Smallmouth trapped us here.”

“Us?” Rusty pulled his gaze from the unearthly reflection and stared at her. Nya’s wide mouth flattened, her eyes lowered.

“We ain’t really from around here.” Her head shook and she sniffed. “And I ain’t a real Texan.”

“I’m sorry,” Rusty said. Then because it just seemed right, he touched her chin with his free hand, tilted her lips, and kissed her. She kissed back and he dropped the fishing stick, pulled her closer.

“Ow!” They jumped apart as if from electric shock.

“That hurt,” Nya growled, glaring at him and rubbing her breast.

“Damn sure did.” Rusty touched the sharp pain in his chest, discovered his shirt pocket. He reached in, gingerly brought out Pa’s jig. Two of the three prongs on the hook glinted bright with blood. The jig itself glowed green, blurred and insubstantial as the mist on the far shore.

“What the hell’s that thang?” Nya hissed, drawing back.

Rusty’s mouth opened. He started to tell her the truth, that it was just Pa’s jig, although admittedly a strange one. But that didn’t sound impressive enough, powerful enough.

“That’s Doom,” he said, setting his mouth hard. “The doom that’s coming to Smallmouth.”

“Like the videogame?” Nya giggled.

Rusty couldn’t help himself. He snickered, shrugged, but then thought of Pa. “Hell yeah,” the laugh came low and mean. He brought out the line, tied a good length of it to his pole, and started to attach the jig. His fingers felt thick and clumsy, but even as they worked, Pa’s voice came to his ears, calming, patient, guiding him through the Nine Knots of Nineveh.

“You’re crazy.” Hands on her hips, Nya stared at him. “I can’t believe you’re gonna—”

“Smallmouth took Pa.” Rusty jerked the final loop tight.

“It’ll take you, too,” Nya said in a sad quiet voice. “That’s how it always ends.”

“I ain’t in no boat.” Rusty shook his head. “And if Smallmouth tries to swallow this pier, he’ll get a mess a boards and nails that’ll stick in his craw.” He turned to her one last time. “Now go on, get outa here. This is serious.”

Nya looked longingly back at the shore, then gazed at him. Finally, she moved beside him, biting her lower lip with slightly protruding teeth. “Nuh-uh. I’m serious too, serious as a heart attack.”

Rusty grinned, braced his feet, and cast the line. The jig glowed, wavering and blinking like a lightning bug gone mad as it arced over the water. It hit the lake with a hiss and a plop, and vanished.

Rusty tugged softly, almost without thinking. He knew what to do, how to play the jig. Pa’s patient teachings on the holy art of jig retrieval came back. A ripple appeared where the jig had hit.

“My oh my,” Nya whispered. “Ain’t never seen it do that before.”

The ripple widened, circles on circles spreading out. A soft wave lapped the pier. The ripples swelled, growing into restless waves that shook the pier even harder.

“Careful there,” Rusty played the lure again, his hand growing surer as he tugged. The pier shuddered and he spread his feet, bracing his balance. Nya latched hold of his arm.

The waves rose higher still. A god-awful bellow echoed as the waters seethed, rising up into a swirl of green mist and mirrors. Again the water roared, a terrible metallic howling that put every Godzilla movie Rusty'd ever seen to shame.

“Shit fire!” Nya shouted. They staggered as the pier lurched. Boards snapped. “Shit fire in the Apocalypse of the Unholy!”

The line snapped tight with a whip crack. The pole yanked Rusty to his knees. Splinters cut his shins. The lake loomed above them, whirling into a conical silhouette that, as moonlight thickened, formed a terrible whiskery head, like some nameless abomination of a mutated catfish.

The pole jerked hard, dragging Rusty forward. The line, glowing in the moonlight, led straight into the tiniest pucker of a fanged and bristly mouth. Eyes like pinpricks into Hell glared down at him.

“Set the hook, boy. Set the god damned hook!” Pa’s voice? Nya’s? Maybe even his own; Rusty no longer knew. His arms jerked nearly out of their sockets. He thought his bones would snap, that his knees would plunge clean through the rotten pier. All his strength, all his seriousness, the will of a luremancer, and Pa grinning to beat the band inside his head. He yanked, sensed the obscenely soft giving as the hook snagged deep.

Nya’s hands clawed his shoulders, dragging him up till his feet got leverage, till splinters lashed at his toes and his very soles. Together they pulled, harder this time. Smallmouth reeled over them, its vast tentacled head careening as they fought it back towards shore. One final surge; Rusty’s foot sank ankle deep into muddy ground.

“This one’s for Pa!”

Smallmouth towered above, and then in a vast ponderous arc, its mirrored misty bulk hurtled down, as terrible and implacable as a tidal wave.

“Hold on,” Nya shouted, arms like iron bands around him.

Rusty pulled hard on the pole and braced his feet a final time. His eyes jammed shut. Smallmouth would crush them, kill them both, but only in its death throes.

Wind rumbled and roared. The line slackened. He flinched, ready to join Pa. Silence! Rusty opened his eyes.

Full moon, cloudless sky all spangled with stars, and Smallmouth the horror, Smallmouth the lake, even Smallmouth the town, had vanished. Rusty stared out at a wide, flat expanse of nothing more than mesquite and sage.

He blinked, dropped the pole, then his knees gave out and he hit butt first on the dusty ground. “Pa,” he whispered. “I got him, Pa.”

“Rusty?”

Rusty turned but it was only Nya who smiled weakly, just now sitting up on a patch of dry grass. Sweat shining in the moonlight, glazing her exceptional cleavage; she looked good—thinner, longer legs than he remembered.

“You look different,” he said.

Nya gazed down at herself, studied her hands, and then peered at her legs. “Hot damn! Ma was telling the truth about that Evinrude salesman from Dallas.” Her grin broadened. “Guess I’m at least half Texan.”

“You damn sure look it.” Rusty brushed the hair from his eyes and nodded.

“Guess I’m alone now, too.” Nya looked away.

“Where’d they go?” Rusty crawled over to her, took her hand. “I mean, they didn’t just die, did they?”

Nya gazed at him and slowly smiled. “Course not. Parson Ib said we’d return to our own spatial firmament, the whole town and everything.” Her eyes widened and she gripped his fingers. “But there’s a way to get there. Parson said there’s another trans-dimensional lake up north.”

“Is that what you want to do?” Rusty asked. This time he looked away.

A cicada buzzed softly from a nearby mesquite. After a while Nya snuggled up against him. “It might be what you want to do. There’s a goodly chance your pa will be there.”

“Pa?” He had to fight to keep from squeezing the air out of her. “Pa!”

Her giggle was music to his ears as she playfully pushed him back. “Smallmouth doesn’t kill its captives for a full lunar cycle. The moon hadn’t set when you destroyed it, so your pa probably washed up near the city.” Her smile flattened into a thoughtful frown. “Be warned though. This other lake—Parson said they got a tournament too.”

Was he truly a luremancer now? Would Pa say so? One thing was certain; he’d use every trick in the tackle box to find his father. Her words hit him then; the stars, the mesquite changed subtly before his eyes. Truly he’d become a luremancer. He knew what Pa had tried to show him, what had been in front of his face all along.

“There are none so blind as those who will not fish,” he murmured.

“Parson Ib said that too.” Nya gave him a wary look. “Y’all know him?”

Rusty shook his head. He settled his arms around Nya. “Another lake, another tournament. Does that mean—?”

“Another incarnation of Smallmouth,” Nya replied, her voice grave in the darkness. “It won’t rest until all land is sea, all men become fish. So Parson Ib was told by the Prophet Ackerman himself.”

Rusty gasped and stared at her. “You can’t be serious.”

“Hell, boy,” she grinned and ran fingers through her hair. “Don’t I look serious?”

“Better than serious.” Rusty figured on kissing her, but curiosity got the better of him. “So where up north?”

“Someplace called Dunwich.” And she kissed him instead.