

Seaborn

CHRIS HOWARD

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info@juno-books.com

For Alice

Chapter One
Kassandra

We are all *Thalassogenêis*—Seaborn.
All life began in the Ocean.
The tides, the salt, the rolling waves
are in our souls,
and the sea will always have
the power to call us home.
—Final page of a journal by
Michael Augustus Henderson

The water followed her home from the library, water in the air slipping over her skin as if afraid to touch her without permission. The sound of water played in her ears—a child's laughter splashing, a creek burbling a mile down Atlantic Avenue—and the soft rain skipped in her footprints.

Headlights broke over the hill behind her, and the wet air *reacted*. The water snapped flat and reflective on every surface until the car passed.

The hiss of automobile tires faded into the whisper of rain and, in the distance, she watched a spray of pinpoint lights, shiny and heavy like mercury on the leaves that folded over the road.

The car was gone and the water spoke to her, words that seeped and dribbled into her head. *I will clothe you in mirror, my lady, shield you in ice, become the crown you*

already wear.

She glanced around and walked faster, huddling under her backpack.

“Leave me alone.”

The rain spat and crackled like angry cellophane, but warned her of another car approaching—miles away, a shiny black sedan pulling out of the North Hampton Police Station. She turned and walked backward along the edge of the road, staring into the dark, her three long brown braids winding around her throat like a noose. She waited a moment for the car to appear, biting her lip uncertainly, and then turned away, her sandals flipping mud behind her.

“The rain’s watching me, Prax.”

Praxinos, a voice inside her, answered with a deep thrum in her jaw. *Of course it is, but its motives are rarely complicated. And you are the Wreath-wearer. It will obey, but you must learn to command.*

“It’s showing me things. I smell its life. The water’s connected.” *It’s in my veins. I am part of it, the water.* She pointed to the asphalt’s edge, broken by the woody knuckles of elms and pines. *I can smell an underground river there.* She looked away because she heard the sap coursing through the trees like blood, sticky snapping insect legs that wanted to crawl to her, capillary roots tugging at the earth as she passed.

Mud oozed between her toes and she stepped into the street, hopping to take off her sandals. The cold rumble of the Piscataqua River six miles away, a hundred brooks and streams in between, all of them coming into her body through her bare feet.

Puddles of rainwater were staring up at her, and she

glared back at them.

“Get away from me.”

She looked over her shoulder, moving to the roadside—still no sign of the car. When she turned back, the rain lit up the night for her, a hundred tunnels drawn in wiry mist, tubes of gauzy moiré. They opened in the air, opening for her, beckoning, and she knew they all led to the sea. She smelled the salt and mold, the bitter rotting seawrack, tasted sand and powdery broken shells in her mouth.

“Just let me go.” She held in a sob, wringing her braids over one shoulder.

Follow the paths to the sea. You have so much to learn, my lady.

“I already know things—things I don’t want to know.”

But the rain showed her more: what she was and what she had been, sparks of memory in scrolling frames, fortress walls on the Atlantic’s floor, a woman’s teeth filed to points, a book with a voice, and the ice-filled bones of an army, two hundred and forty-thousand strong, wired together and sent to kill the dangerous girl, the Wreath-wearer—the girl with a soul of abyss-dark and noble ghosts, the girl made of inferno and restless gasoline.

“Don’t do this to me.” Her voice changed as it passed her lips. The water in her breath garbled her words, obeying another power inside her.

She tried a commanding tone: “I’ll go when I want to!” The words twisted and softened, warm candy words in her mouth, floating sweet over her tongue.

She stomped through puddles. Her angry scream coiled into a song that summoned the tide—and the Atlantic Ocean roared in answer a mile away.

She tripped in a pothole and the water in the air caught her and kept her from falling—and the rain tipped the leaves and danced on the asphalt in her wake.

Cursing under her breath, she ran recklessly, her head down, past an old lichen-covered wall. The damp between the stones bled to the edges to be near her, condensing in huddling beads.

She looked up and blinked, slowing to a walk, and the rain showed her more. Another set of ghost caves unfolded, spiraling over each other, fading to dim intestinal coils if she looked hard at them, flaring electric bright every time she blinked.

“Let the rain hit me! I don’t care.” She looked away and the superimposed ghost world pivoted with her, paths shifting to accommodate her, the axis.

The clouds heard her call; bruised purple and water heavy, they gathered over coastal New Hampshire. She looked at them through the trees and tossed her sandals away.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” And she spat before the water could muddle her words.

Her shout broke the storm; falling sheets of water hit the earth, and no reply came from the clouds, the rivers, the underground streams, the endless hungry Atlantic Ocean, unable to answer a queen who begged her subjects for direction.

“Pôs eipas? Epitribeiês! Is this what you want?”

Barefoot, she stepped into the middle of the road and threw her arms wide; lifting her open mouth, she drank in the storm. Hot bars of lightning burned the air. Thunder swept through her bones, the thud of their crash to the earth

under her toes.

Columns of rain broke through the canopy of pine and maple. Her fingers spread wide and then closed into fists, and the storm shattered at her feet like a car's windshield, beads of rain spiraling into razor-edged water stars that burst in rings of frost-lace and mist.

The crinkle of something alive slid up her body, coating her in armor: tight transparent sleeves, a skin of flexible arctic-blue scales, a collar of ice blades. Her fist tightened reflexively around the grip of a sword, and a crown of woven seaweed glowed cold green through her rain-wet brown hair.

She sang a storm of words, and lightning swaggered through the trees, blasting away bark. A sixty-foot pine split with a gush of sap, smoke, and vaporized needles; splinters rained down with the water.

Headlights shot through the hazy night and she lowered her arms. The sword vanished. The armor disappeared, melting off her body. She stood alone in the street, soaking wet in a T-shirt and shorts, her backpack hanging loose off one shoulder.

She gave the approaching police car an angry squint and turned away, taking rapid steps along the road's edge, washed in a pulse of blue light. She kept her head down because she didn't want to see the pale outlines of caves in the air, holding her breath against their salty lure. Before she covered her ears, the rain urged her to run. *Leave everything behind. Run, my lady, run where the police cannot follow. I will hide you.*

"Don't talk to me." She snapped the words into the wet air.

Her steps slowed, her body shaking, weariness dragging at her. Her backpack slipped off her shoulder, fell to the ground with a dull splash. Her books and research papers raced for the pack's zipper-toothed mouth; a binder spread its wings, scattering its brood, white sheets of neat handwriting, wet-winged butterflies briefly alive, folding sullen and colorless in the rain.

She kept walking.

The black car rolled forward, the passenger side window sliding into the door.

"You need a ride, miss? This rain isn't letting up and it's a dark road to be walking alone."

"A dark road," she whispered, and something inside her made all the words but one drift away, forgotten. "Alone." She said it aloud, blinking purposefully, trying to climb out of her head and back into the world. She glanced at the blue stripes on the shiny black fender as if noticing the car for the first time.

"The police are here," she told the other voices in her head.

A woman answered snobbishly, *Tell the police to go. You do not need their help.*

She blinked, trying to answer, but ended up repeating the rain's words: "I have so much to learn."

"How much have you had to drink tonight?" The officer again—it sounded like the police officer, the patrol car rolling to match her pace.

She bent to look through the open window. Her focus hit him hard, and he choked on his words; his heart stalled, his soul falling through dark water toward her, into the abyss of her eyes.

And the rain whispered, *Alone, Lady Cassandra, you must be alone.*

Still looking at the police officer, pinning him to his seat, she answered the rain. “Silence!”

Then she plucked the officer’s name right out of his head. “I *have* been drinking, Lieutenant Pannone. I’ve been drinking the rain.”

She released him and walked away.

Pannone’s forehead hit the hard plastic of the steering wheel. His heart thumped a wild rhythm and then evened into a steady rapid beat. He sucked air in desperate gulps and flexed his numbing fingers, staring out the windows as if he was lost.

He fell back in his seat, his uniform damp against his skin. Reality snapped into place for him. He closed his eyes tight, then opened them, trying to get the blue arcs and red backlit dials of the dashboard into focus.

A squeak of wiper blades. He looked up through the windshield and remembered the young woman with the backpack walking in his headlights in the middle of Atlantic Avenue.

Pannone wiped sweat from above his lips. He grabbed a tissue off the visor, wadding it damply in one fist. He tugged out three more to wipe his forehead and rolled the car forward to again come alongside her.

“Are you on medication, miss? You supposed to be? Can I call your parents?” She made no sign that she heard him, so he went on. “A shrink? Maybe your grandparents?”

She looked over but didn’t meet his eyes. “My grandfather killed my mother. I’m going to kill him. He’s expecting it, so I must plan well.”

She noticed the officer hiding his reaction, and she scowled because it hadn't been alarm. It was sympathy.

He leaned closer. "What's your name?"

It was written all over his car, bleeding K's and S's, beads of rain lining up, a thousand *Kassandras* on the windows, weeping letters on black paint.

She turned away and covered her eyes, pressing the palms of her hands against her cheeks, her thumbs digging into the sides of her head. "Do *not* tell me what to do!"

Thunder boomed far away and the voices in her head went quiet.

The officer let his seatbelt snap away, leaning over the passenger seat, holding the wheel with his knee, showing her his open hands. "I can take you to a hospital. Just let me help. You shouldn't be out here alone."

She didn't hear him, the rain shielding her from the sound of his voice.

She stopped as if she had run up against something solid in the air, her hands falling away from her face. Her world collapsed to the stretch of road the patrol car's headlights carved out of night, stiflingly small, and she tugged at her shirt, wet and binding around her throat.

Kassandra dropped into a runner's crouch, bending her knees deep, and launched her body down the edge of the asphalt, an off-the-blocks sprint for the lights' edge, her three brown braids streaming like wet rope in her wake. She was through the headlight horizon and into the dark, rain like needles against her skin, arms pumping, breathing hard through her teeth.

Pannone kicked the accelerator, topping forty miles an hour to keep up. He braked hard where Mill Road crossed

Atlantic Avenue, turning into a slide that took him into the oncoming lane. The young woman collided with a pickup truck at the stop sign.

Pannone swung his door open, flipped on the side-spots and jumped into the street, not bothering with his hat or coat.

The pickup's driver stared through a rain-blurred sweep of wiper blades, his lips twitching, knuckles bone white on the wheel.

Officer Pannone crouched, examining the fender and the street along the driver's side, his dark uniform rain-pasted to his skin, water dribbling into his mouth, off his nose and chin. He kneeled to run his flashlight under the truck. He stepped back to take in the scene from a wider view, throwing the beam of light on the street, the wheels, windshield, letting it slide across the truck's hood.

Right in the center, the rain softened a muddy footprint. There was no other sign of her.

He turned the beam of the flashlight on dark empty Atlantic Avenue. She had vanished.

Pannone switched off the light and headed back to his car.

He slammed the door and dropped it in reverse, accelerating half a mile up Atlantic, looking for her backpack in the flashing blue. He pulled over and spent another hour walking, following depressions in the mud and blurry footprints where she had wandered into the middle of the road.

He gave up.

The rain coming through the trees annoyed him, running off the leaves, whispering his name in his ears, tapping a

rhythm that promised to be catchy, but slowed or doubled unexpectedly, and would not allow itself to be caught.

Chapter Two

Highway 17

I am an outsider, but I have been so thoroughly drawn inside another world—a most alien world—that I scarcely know where to begin.

—Opening line of a journal by
Michael Augustus Henderson

Corina Lairsey dived alone on Thursdays.

She lived thirty miles inland, in Coyote, south of San José, and spent an hour every morning battling traffic downtown to C-COM—California College of Music.

Every Thursday she cut her afternoon classes to make time for the Pacific, and so she also drove Highway 17 alone, navigating the dipping winding double lanes up over the summit and down the west side toward Monterey Bay.

All but one of her fingers curled tight around the wheel, the loose one tapped to a rhythm in her head; a fine stream of tears ran down her cheeks.

She wiped away her tears, blinking over the steering wheel at a looming bar of red and white reflective tape, candy-caned across the back doors of a massive refrigerator truck just ahead of her.

She braked hard and cut abruptly into the parade of fast-lane hogging compact cars, glancing in the rearview at the guy flashing his headlights.

The freighter barreled down the slow lane with its cargo rocking and suspension creaking, its giant wheels circular

blurs of droning gray a foot in the next lane. The slope steepened and the truck jake-braked with the rumble of an idling chainsaw that penetrated Corina's Toyota, mingling with the music in the other cars, harmonica-saturated gutter folk, boy band harmonies, and thumping technorhythmia.

Corina didn't have her music playing, except in her head.

Almost at the bottom of the Santa Cruz Mountains, she let her mind slip into replay mode—with accompanying music—watching her ex-boyfriend's mouth drop open when she told him goodbye, so long, *adiós*, don't call me, ever.

Corina wasn't weeping for the loss of Alan Yeater. She was glad to be free of him, free of another man who had started with flowers, caring, and constant attention, and ended with control over every detail of her life: where to eat, who to make friends with, who to drop, what to wear, what not to wear, how much to weigh, how much make-up, fingernail polish, toothpaste, breakfast, lunch, dinner...*Give me some damn space!*

She knew she had to end it when she saw “the look.” He'd told her to change out of a flirty pink blouse, and she'd laughed and said, “What are you, my grandmother?” His face had gone rigid, his blue eyes molten, like opening a little iron door on a furnace, nothing but hot blurry anger inside.

She said goodbye, walked away, and kept walking with Alan Yeater screaming at her back, “No one walks away from me!”

The tears weren't for Alan. He'd never really seen who she was, what she was like inside and out. As if he had some unchanging picture of her in his head, and any deviation from it was a challenge to his authority.

The frenetic notes of a Beethoven string quartet coiled

and jumped in the background of her imagination. Her breakup with Alan had taken no longer than it took two violins, a viola, and cello to get through the second movement of “Opus 130”—which she’d renamed “The Alan Yeater Breakup Presto.”

She sniffed back more tears, savoring the same minute and forty-nine seconds of memory over and over. At least she’d gotten rid of him quickly.

In the final stretch of 17, Corina had to deal with a few predatory stockcar racers, darting in and out of the lanes, making their own narrow passages down the shoulders. They taunted her into slaloming to the interchange. She obliged and would have outraced one of them if there hadn’t been a blur of black and white in her peripheral vision. She slowed down and slid into the right lane, letting the patrol car go by.

There were California Highway Patrol officers who made careers out of Highway 17.

Corina emerged from the death race with her vehicle and pinkslip intact, and went south on Route 1 toward Monterey. Half an hour later she pulled off at the first exit of the old army post, Fort Ord.

The road had, at one time, curved around to drop drivers at the post’s shooting range. Now it curved around into a small traffic circle with four roads shooting off in different directions.

Corina heard her phone chirping. *Alan calling.* She leaned into the wheel, grabbed her phone, and slid it up against her ear. She sucked in a deep breath.

“Yup?”

There was a long pride-swallowing pause. “It’s me.” His voice was rough, hitching in his throat.

Her mind jumped right to: *He isn't crying, is he?* She killed the question, and her lips went tight with the effort to keep them shut. *It's over. Make him do the talking.* She pulled up to the curb, stopping in the darkness under the overpass. The shifter knob vibrated in her hand. She dropped the car out of gear, but left the engine running.

Alan drew in a long breath. "It's me, babe."

She sniffed and shook her head, annoyed. *Already said that.*

"Look...I'm..." Alan's voice smoothed out. "You going to say anything?"

"I was pretty clear the day before yesterday."

She felt a drop in the temperature over the phone.

Alan's voice thinned to a knife's edge. "Are you seeing someone else?"

Else? That implies that I'm still seeing you. Corina stopped her grinding molars before they crumbled in her mouth. *Seeing someone else...* She ducked to her side mirror as a couple in a minivan passed her. "Two, actually."

He choked. "So, this is it?"

It ended two days ago. "What more do you need me to say?"

"Fuck you! I don't *need* you to—" He fumed and spit more words out. "You need me. You hear me? Crawl back to me, stupid whore, begging me! You need—"

"Save your saliva."

She powered off her phone, took a deep breath, and stared back at herself in the rearview mirror, her brown eyes fixed with purpose. *No more tears. No asking how she got herself into these relationships. Nothing blurry, overemotional, nothing out of control.*

"Proud of you," she whispered and her voice broke.

A couple cars passed her, entered the loop, and headed south toward the university. Old army posts never die—they're turned into parks and unique leasing opportunities like the Presidio of San Francisco, like Ord, schools.

Corina kicked in the clutch, put the car in gear, and took the northbound road. She passed ancient barracks and clapboard warehouses, all painted tan with big black numbers stenciled on the corners. Most were abandoned and had sat there peeling in the salt air and sun for decades. Cal State Monterey took up a large chunk of property at the other end of the post.

She turned onto a small road that swung back under the freeway toward the dunes and the bay beyond, pulling over at the end of a broken concrete pad, crunching mats of iceplant under her tires. She tucked her car up against a group of squat cypress trees.

She got out, stuffed her keys, rings and driver's license into a watertight pouch, and then she unbuttoned, unzipped, and stripped off her clothes.

Corina opened the door to the back and tossed her skirt, blouse, and bra across the cello case that shared the backseat with her dive gear. She squirmed into her wetsuit, black neoprene tubing that fit her body like another skin, tucking in her hair, snapping the black foamy material of the hood around her cheeks and chin.

Then she squatted and wriggled like a wet cat, getting used to the suit's squeeze on her neck and thighs. She fixed the seams along her arms and straightened her spine, reaching into the air, lifting her body on the balls of her feet, her calf muscles flexing until they burned.

She hauled her dive gear up the path that led to the

endless Pacific, stopping at the crest to take it all in, the crash of surf, smooth blue folds at the horizon catching the sun in broken metal glimmers, a drawer full of wobbling teaspoons tossed over the bay's surface.

“I need you like I've never needed anyone.”

She spoke the lie in a reassuring whisper even as the teeth in her mind, the hunger in her soul, fed on memories of shattered glass and steel wrung like a rag, a slick of oil and blood, brakelight fragments like wicked witch fingernails poking through the asphalt, through the oil, through the blood. And in her memories, she fell to the street and never got up, the rumble of cars coming into her skin through the warm tar surface, through her jaw, into her head; her tears pooled in the corner of her mouth, and time stopped there, a fluid that filled every yesterday, a moment long past that still rang in her ears.

She blinked at the California sun and saw her mother's hair squeezed between the seat and headrest in front of her, the *tick tick tick* of the left turn signal—and her sister's cold hospital voice interrogating her. “Why did *you* live when Mom and Dad died? What makes you so special?”

Corina had survived, dragged by firefighters from the backseat crush of metal and folded bones. Her mother and her father were dead in their seats.

Corina Lairsey cut off a whimper, but couldn't hold in her tears. They rolled from her eyes, falling down her wetsuit, soaked up by the sand—and she pushed the volume of the music in her head up to drown the endless-moment ringing. The music in her head—the only thing that softened the memory of her mother's sharp intake of breath just before impact.

The Pacific whispered loudly and Corina dragged her gear to the edge, another Thursday walking into the cold blue, and even when a part of her didn't want it to, it let her go every week.

She squinted at the sun. Smiling at a seagull, she wiped the tears away with the back of her hand, and slid the mask on, propping it on her forehead. The waves called to her and promised not to let her fall.

The Pacific was eternal. The ocean would always be there to hold her tight and make her whole, something the air just could not do.

Chapter Three

Fast

Who are they, O pensive Graces,
—For I dream'd they wore your forms—
Who on shores and sea-wash'd places
Scoop the shelves and fret the storms?
Who, when ships are that way tending,
Troop across the flushing sands.
To all reefs and narrows wending,
With blown tresses, and with beckoning
 hands?
—“The New Sirens,” Matthew Arnold

“Fast attack submarine.” Cassandra whispered the three words as if they were her favorites, running her fingers along the slick acoustic cladding of the sail—the tall fin-shaped tower sticking out of the top of the sub.

“This is the most beautiful machine I have ever seen.”

Her own words echoed in her head, and under her breath, she relayed a description of the marvelous submarine to the others inside her soul.

Kassandra had made her way several miles up the coast of New Hampshire to the mouth of the Piscataqua River, kicking against the current until she found the Naval Shipyard on the far bank. Not far. After all, her father and her bodyguard, Zypheria, told her to stay close to home.

There were two submarines in the water, one with a maintenance rack over the bell at the bow, and ropes and

umbilicals running from the boat to the cleats or into the big gray utility sheds. She found two more subs in drydock, but settled on exploring one tied up at the pier.

The water from the Piscataqua dribbled from Kassandra's braids, down her back and off the rounded hull. She squatted and looked down the black sloping length of the boat, leaning against her sheathed sword, using it to keep her balance.

"Fast." She stood and took ten even steps toward the sub's stern, trying to measure its length. "Attack." She lifted her sword in its scabbard, tapping the steel cables running from the sail to the dock above her. "Submarine."

She heard the approaching footsteps of one of the Shore Patrol, but she didn't run, just glanced over her shoulder at the dark river to see that her path of retreat was clear. The Navy and Coast Guard ran patrol boats along the Piscataqua, and she didn't want one racing up behind her without knowing about it. She turned a little to face the patrolman on the edge of the dock above her.

"He's cute," she breathed the words to herself.

The patrolman looked to be in his twenties, with stubbly blond hair and vigilant eyes that shifted along the docks and submarine maintenance buildings. Kassandra's gaze followed the earpiece that stuck out a little over his cheek, then dropped along his shoulder with some stripes, insignia she didn't understand, down to his waist where a handgun was holstered. His focus had moved to the river, but well over her head. He didn't appear to notice her, invisible in a tight blue long sleeved shirt and shorts, standing motionless ten meters astern of the sail.

She cleared her throat politely.

The patrolman's gaze dropped, and he swung one hand up into a boxer's guard position. The other unsnapped the holster strap.

“Who are you?”

Kassandra pointed at her feet with her sword. “How many crewmen does it take to run one of these?”

He blinked at her as if he had trouble seeing her. There was a young woman standing on the submarine below.

He shook his head. “Uh...I mean...Over a hundred and forty officers and enlisted. What are you doing here? How did you get past the gate?”

She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder to the river behind her. “I came from the water. What kind of weaponry?” She used her sword to indicate the length of the boat. “I see vertical launch tubes. Those are for torpedoes? I've done research, but there's still a lot I don't know. What can a torpedo—one of the MKs—do in terms of damage against stone battlements, let's say twenty feet thick? How deep can they go? Deeper than the submarine? What about mines? Does this sub carry them?”

The patrolman looked increasingly concerned. Was she waving a sword around? “You can't...Does your dad work here?”

Kassandra huffed at his inability to answer her questions. Maybe he didn't know. She moved on. “How fast is fast? When you call this a fast attack submarine, are you talking thirty knots or a hundred and thirty?”

He spoke into his comm gear, his right hand slipping into the holster for his gun. “Patrol? I need back up at river five. Unauthorized—”

Kassandra sighed, and without another word, turned,

tucked her sword against her side, and dove off the sub into the black green water of the Piscataqua, barely leaving a swirl in the surface to mark her passage.

By the time the harbor patrol boat roared up, she was out past 2KR, the red buoy at the Portsmouth Harbor entrance, marking the separation of the river and the Atlantic.

Chapter Four

Free Diving

I know human lungs have never been capable of operating efficiently with so thick a medium as seawater. They have evolved over millennia for breathing air in a relatively narrow range of surface pressures. The human fetus does not breathe amniotic fluid, but receives all the necessary nutrients and oxygen through the placenta from the mother.

—From a journal by
Michael Augustus Henderson

The Pacific slipped up Corina's legs, cold and clinging, circling her waist, the water sensing the warm life under her wetsuit, nimbly prying at the seams, seeping through the material to chill her skin.

She pushed the mask against her face, fitting it over her cheeks and forehead. Without pause or fear, she walked into the monstrous waves of ocean thundering against the beach.

Violent water swallowed her; there was a roar in her ears, a rush of ice over her body, then silence. She was under, inside the storm, inside the other world that folded over the surface of the world that didn't want her.

Then she weighed nothing.

She drew a breath, wet and loud in her ears, a gush of salt in her mouth, metallic and bitter.

She kicked hard, following the smooth sandy slope until

the rocks broke it up, edging away from the floor, into open sea.

Corina was a hundred meters from shore when something in the endless blue hit her in the back, almost playfully. She kicked and paddled, turning much too slowly, her movements clumsy and heavy like an astronaut on a spacewalk. She spun, looking for the cause, a shadow that moved just beyond her peripheral vision. She was alone, but something not made of seawater had bumped forcefully into her tanks, something alive, with the weight and mischievous power of a sea lion. She sucked in a shallow breath, biting into her mouthpiece. Her skin went colder under her suit. Sharks bumped potential prey before devouring them. She paddled one more time around.

There was nothing there.

Her eyes moved in small left-to-right shifts, trying to pick up anything solid out of the wide space of water, dropping to her fins to focus on anything beyond them. The sloping floor of sand and rock darkened as it angled away from the shoreline, velvety blue fading into black.

She thumbed on her dive lights, one dangling from her wrist, the other on a strap over her left shoulder.

The Pacific's surge lifted her gently, and she watched and waited. *Enough*. She threw her hands over her head and kicked, a reflex, a reaction to tiny changes in the ocean her body somehow picked up without having any exposed skin. There was something in the water with her. She just couldn't see it.

Then it touched her, poked her in the shoulder. She kicked away, spinning right, too slowly, and it anticipated her direction; it hooked her arms and jerked her back,

tugging on the hoses, nearly ripping the regulator from her mouth. Her feet flipped out in front of her. The skin along her neck tightened, and she scooped the water, twirling to catch a glimpse of whatever it was.

Nothing there.

A chill ran through her, and she slid her hands over her wetsuit as if to wipe something off.

Her eyes stung trying to focus on anything out of the infinite gloom. She looked up and kicked. Her intuition—the combined prickling, wrenching, and screaming of several major organs at once—told her: *Get the fuck out of here! Surface. Get to the surface!*

She kicked hard, her breathing loud in her ears. She pushed her body toward the light, her mind racing with questions, twisting her thoughts into knots, strings of words circling around and repeating themselves, mostly variations on *What the hell is that?*

She didn't have any immediate answers, and the ones lurking at the edges scared her too much to state them clearly.

Corina jerked her hands back as a colder current pushed over her gloves. She slowed for half a second, stunned, and then kicked again. Her body slammed into something solid but invisible in the water, jarring her teeth. She grunted over her reg. Her mask hammered into her face. Seawater squeezed in, pooling around her nose. She slid upside down and the saltwater blinded her. Her legs swung over her head, and her heels hammered into the barrier, shaking every bone in her body.

Finger-like cables grabbed her hands. She couldn't see them. She felt them, tightening, squeezing painfully around her wrists, snaking over her biceps, under her arms and

back over her shoulders.

Her hands slapped together in front of her and the tentacles dragged her through the water, towing her deeper and to the south, toward Monterey and the cliffs of the southern edge of the underwater canyon.

Corina folded her knees to create some drag, and tugged as hard as she could, fighting the thing that held her. She bit into her regulator, screaming curses in big wobbly bubbles that ripped past her face.

Her breathing quickened into a saw-like roar in her ears, making her lightheaded.

The water went black, her dive lights dancing off the rocks as her invisible captor dragged her up against the canyon wall. She kicked wildly, and tried to hook her fins on a passing ridge. She flew over the crenellated row of rock, gray in the twilight like the broken wall of a haunted castle.

Watery fingers wriggled over her body, tightening their grip, working their way down her back, around her waist, spiraling her throat. She tucked her head down, trying to stop it from choking her.

The shadowy face of the cliff came at her fast, and she drew her legs toward a meter-wide slice of pure black, a cave in the tall face of rock.

The current freed her at the mouth, and tossed her inside. Corina bent her knees and had her hands halfway up to her face when a thicket of woody-branched gorgonians caught her. Stiff pink stems of coral scraped her arms, clawing at her mask and hoses.

She kicked and clutched at the walls of the cave, tearing off a mat of sea-sponge in her scramble to right herself.

Get into open water.

She twisted her body around and climbed clumsily toward the mouth, her fins catching on the sea-growth on the floor, tiny flowers with mouths and questing tentacles, rigid patches of needlework sponge. Snags of rock cut through her gloves and her blood twisted in the water like smoke, clouding the dim light at the cave mouth. She pushed through it, and shoved her head forward.

The invisible current hit her, pushing her neck back. It tore her fingers from the rocks, and threw her deeper into the cave. She kicked madly, clawing her way to the entrance again. She ripped a big chunk of sponge off the wall, and shoved it behind her.

Corina froze.

She forgot to breathe, and the whole ocean went silent. She turned to her left, her eyes locked on the stretch of bare rock where she had torn off the sponge.

A human handprint stood out on the flat stone face. It was like a blood painting on the wall of some Paleolithic era cave.

Corina's mind raced, throwing thoughts in every direction. *How?* She choked on her first conclusions. Questions sparked and went cold. Forty meters down. *Never. This cave's never been above the waterline. Ice age? Sea level dropped hundreds of feet. Okay, even if it ever had, the water would have washed away man's presence thousands of years ago.* She started to shake her head, her muscles just coming into sync with her thoughts. *It's paint or blood on bare rock.*

And she wanted to touch it. Badly.

Paint or blood in saltwater. Under a hundred-year-old

growth of sea-sponge. Who—whose hand?

She forgot where she was, or how she had been dragged there. She stared at the print. Long fingers, a wide palm, a man's hand. The pigment blurred like webbing between the fingers.

Her eyes dropped in alarm to her own hand reaching up, fingers spreading to match the one on the rock. A stringy haze of blood seeped from her glove, twirling in the water like strips of black gauze.

She placed her right hand against the stone, over the wound-red print. Her fingers flexed but didn't reach the tips. She pressed her palm hard against the unyielding stone.

A bolt of heat rushed through her. Her arm and shoulder went numb. She sucked in air in tight little drags, rabbit breaths, in-and-out gusts seesawing in her ears.

She had...done something. The handprint was a lock of some kind. She was a key. She couldn't catch up to her thoughts to find out how she knew that. Her mind raced with a flood of...someone else's information.

She arched her back, kicking violently, struggling to get away from it. The stone cracked, and whatever was locked behind the handprint fired out of its prison and into her body.

Corina flew across the cave and slammed into the wall of sharp coral and rock.

Sobbing in terror, her mouth opened and she spit out her regulator. Something moved through her hair, against her neck...pain shot into her head like hot iron coming through bone.

The world buckled inside itself, narrowed down to the iridescent circle from her shoulder light. It danced along the

cave wall and her soul nearly followed it out of her body; it remained anchored only by thin threads of sensation, the sound of her chattering teeth and the hot seep of urine down her thighs.

The motion of the world slowed to a crawl. Her legs glided up in front of her, and a sizzling sound tickled her ears.

I can't move.

Her eyes closed and she couldn't open them again. She couldn't lift her neck. She screamed...inside her head. Nothing came from her mouth.

Some primitive directive fired repeatedly, told her to close her mouth. *Do not let the ocean inside your mouth.* Too late.

Her regulator hovered over her, swaying up and back like an offended cobra. Even without her eyes, she knew it was always in reach. She couldn't lift her arms, or curl her fingers.

She sagged in the ocean's embrace, unable to stir the smallest of muscles. She tried to move her feet and wrinkle her nose. She tasted something sour, as if someone had shoved her face in a bucket of rancid cabbage—but it wasn't her doing the tasting.

Then she heard her own voice—someone else controlling it—using a thoroughly disgusted tone. It snapped off a bunch of words in a language she didn't understand.

She felt her lips move, her throat contracting, lungs struggling to make words, but it was someone else making her mouth and throat say them. She heard bits of words: "*Lepto...*" followed by "*koost-ho...*" She didn't catch the rest, but she heard the revulsion, a bottomless hatred in the

tone.

Someone using her voice said the word “*Thalassa*” several times. A compound form then burst from her mouth, “*Thalassogenêis.*”

She felt the words against the inside of her own throat, rumbling through her head, and the last of her breath escaped her lungs, passing her lips in fat shaky bubbles of air.

Her body shuddered and curled into a knot, her arms wrapping her knees. She felt her mouth move feverishly, more words she didn’t know, and without any sound. Her lips opened expectantly and let the ocean inside. She tasted it, salty and ice cold against her teeth. It punched into the back of her mouth, down her throat and filled her empty lungs.

Her mind halted in terror. It was like experiencing someone else’s drowning. A burn like hot metal shot up her spine, sharp cramps gripped her stomach. Every thought in her head disintegrated. Her mind went blank, dead, a bitter black pool.