Yuri woke up to the sound of waves breaking at the end of the street, and knew that the undines had breached the final defences. Even his house, one of the furthest from the harbour, would be theirs once again, like the rest of the city.

He had slept in the upper bedroom and now looked out into the morning, surveying the city. The evacuation had begun a week earlier and been surprisingly orderly at first. Each street had moved together in strict order, beginning with those closest to the flooded harbour. The carts and horses were used for one migration, then returned a few hours later for the next street on the plan.

Yuri's house was at the top of the low hills and so they would be among the last to leave. Black-haired Vitaly, his eldest, wanted to get going, and thought he could head for the parkland at the top of the hill to find alternative transport. He wanted to get to the tent city and make sure he had a place for Piotr and Nina before he set off for Odinograd. None of them expected the refugee camp to be salubrious and, with the rumours of a mobilisation for a counter-attack any day now, Yuri had instructed him to find somewhere safe from the inundation and send for his siblings as soon as he could.

"Look, Da!" Piotr, his middle child, was dragging a dinghy up the street as Yuri came outside. "Look what Barinov sold me!"

Yuri stroked his ragged beard, peppered with flecks of white, putting on a show of disapproving evaluation. A fifty-year-old man with a full head of unruly blond hair, prominent lines around his eyes and sunburnt skin, penned in by memories and the rising unnatural tide. At last he nodded approvingly at the extra boat, then grinned. "Can we get it to the roof? It might be useful there."

Piotr rolled his eyes at Yuri and said, "You're really not coming? The water's already reached the next street. It's rising much faster than they said."

"That's why I might need a boat on the roof!" Yuri tried not to look worried, glancing down the hill. Sure enough, he could see water pooling at the crossroads, and wondered where those carts had got to, whether they had evacuated the streets below them. "Where's your sister? She should be up by now."

Piotr looked around for her, and Yuri ran his hands through his hair. Did it show? Could they tell how scared he was? Were they putting on a front for the old man?

“She’s in the house,” said Vitaly, “packing up Ma’s jewellery and preparing a bag for her.”

“No,” said Piotr, “she’s not. I saw her down the hill, talking to that old body, Marissa.”

Damn that girl! Twelve-years old and uncontrollable! “Vitaly, go fetch her.”

As the lanky boy—no, he was a man, Yuri reminded himself—trotted down the hill, Yuri sat on the wall outside their little house and rubbed his temples. It was definitely getting hotter. Already the day sweltered, and even though he had been trying to pack only essentials for the children they seemed to have too many boxes.

Born to a water family like theirs, it was only natural that Nina had been at least half fish or half porpoise, as her brothers had so often teased her. Since the inundation began, and since Ana had left, Nina had been combing the slowly drowning neighbourhoods for sightings. She kept careful notes of the areas and suburbs she had searched, and though he forbade her from doing so there was too much to be done for him to watch her every hour. She would always slip away. Like her mother.

He thought back to the dry days when he had first met Ana. That stupid fight over the fish he’d just caught, which she had claimed as her own. His idiotically naïve acceptance of her story that her boat was just over the horizon…

Piotr was looking through the binoculars down at the submerged harbour and the angry foam that covered the lower streets. “There’s something down in the water, Da. I think those boats are under attack.”

Yuri took the instrument to see for himself. At first he didn’t quite get the angle right and focussed on the great vortex of the King Under the Sea, now lying just offshore. For years, the great whirlpool had lain offshore and all mariners had known to avoid it, except on festival days and when the sacrifices were required. It was said that the King lived at the bottom of the spout, and though no human had ever claimed to have seen him, all who lived by the shore felt his presence. Now the waves and the current were violent, keeping the folk from their boats, driving the water inland, and, each day, a steady stream of his creatures entered the city to hunt.

Yuri moved his aim across the cranes and the tops of the harbour buildings, now just poking through the angry water—then found it. The lens on the left was cracked, but he could make out a row boat… just in time to see it overwhelmed by black amphibian shapes, flipping and splashing out of the water.

Yuri shuddered. He heard shouting and lowered the binoculars as Vitaly and Nina, his beloved tomboy, came running round the corner and up the hill, a thin tide of dirty water fast behind them. As the torrent spread out to swamp new buildings they

outpaced it, but the King had laid his marker firmly at the end of Yuri's street. It was time.

He grabbed his daughter in an embrace, just for a second. Over her shoulder he barked at the boys, "Load the boat, the water will reach us soon enough. Get only the essentials, move the rest of it back upstairs." Piotr ran back into the house and Vitaly started lifting bags into the fortuitous dinghy.

He released Nina but held her shoulders firmly, looked at her eye to eye. "Where have you been?" he said, sounding angrier than he felt inside. Her eyes were red from tears, and her tunic and trousers were damp and dirty. "What on earth do you think you're doing? The King is taking this city and we need to leave!"

"I was looking for Ma," she wailed. "I can't believe you're going to leave without her! What is wrong with you?"

For a moment, Yuri nearly wept as well, but he never showed any weakness before the children, even his only daughter. He had promised, and Nina was too young to understand. But he had also promised to get them over the hill before the King Under the Sea began his onslaught, and it was nearly too late, so he blinked back the tears and shouted at the brothers to get the dinghy ready if they didn't want a hiding, big as they were.

By the time the water was deep enough to float their larger boat, the deluge was growing more vicious. Torrents burst between the houses as a fresh wave rolled in. Their neighbours and the few other citizens remaining ran shouting down these last dry streets, and Yuri considered abandoning their possessions and heading for the hills on foot.

They loaded the new-found dinghy with enough supplies for the three children, then carried it to the edge of the rising water and lowered it in, tethered to the back of their boat. They paddled away from the stream of panicked refugees and went into the drowning city instead, making their way through eerily deserted suburbs.

As the city's edge gave way to sodden countryside, the land began to rise. Once they reached the meadow, Yuri left the children with a hug and a gruff farewell. Then he headed back to the family home, as he had always planned.

To wait for his wife.

The water levels settled after the initial surge. The ground floor was not immediately submerged so he completed moving their possessions on that first day, all the while keeping track of the progress of the King and his creatures through the binoculars. Just in case.

While he waited, he worked, telling himself each day that, if this were to be his last day in the family home, then he would make the most of it. As he had done every morning since the children left, he reached for the battered old binoculars kept on the bookshelf and looked for signs of life. On this bright, clear morning he could see as far as the flatlands on the other side of the harbour, now permanently inundated by saltwater that glistened green in the sun, no longer able to sustain the garden crops the city had once required.

He caught hints of movement, not just white spray like that breaking in front of the house, but distant spouts and whirlpools. The undines were hunting again. In packs, isolating the vulnerable, tipping them into the water and then pulling them under. They toyed with their prey, like the whale pods that hunted in packs alongside the city's fishing fleets.

He should leave, should be with his children, protecting Piotr and Nina, helping Vitaly find a new place for them in Odinograd. But that far city was on a river and Yuri knew that they'd find no peace there. He could not make himself go. Not without seeing Ana one more time. Nina would understand that, at least.

That he did not search for Ana, though… that she would not.

A week passed.

One of his former neighbours returned for some prize furniture and brought a big boat to the bottom of the street; he also came by with a note from Vitaly. The children were all safe, but procuring a horse was proving difficult so Piotr and Nina were staying with friends in the tent city. Yuri had never liked this man, but appreciated him passing on the news, and was thanking him when they heard a splash from the back of the boat. They both went to look, cautiously, but found nothing.

When he returned to the kitchen, Yuri's daughter was sitting on a stool at the counter, beaming a huge self-satisfied grin.

Pleasure at the sight of her warred with both fear and fury. "I told you to stay away," he said, swallowing down all three.

"But mother—" she protested.

"She's left us, Nina."

"She wouldn't do that to us! She wouldn't just leave me. What did you do to her? Why did she leave in the night? Why didn't she say goodbye?"

He wasn’t surprised that she blamed him. He had always doted on her, and Nina had always exploited that. Ana had been the authority in Nina’s life, and, without her, the adolescent girl sought scapegoats and struggled for answers.

He couldn’t tell her the truth. That Ana had left just as the King entered the bay. She had woken him, made coffee, talked until he understood, until he agreed, and then made him swear to protect the children. She had taken nothing with her, departing naked into the night.

“I told you that she’s gone.”

“But why? And how will she find us now that all this has happened?”

“When you’re older you’ll understand. Some people are just different, special, and when two people are so different, well, as different as your mother and I…”

He trailed off. Nina was fighting to hold back a sob. He could see from her expression that she thought he was confessing to an affair.

“What did you do?” she said again, then stormed out of the kitchen and up to her room without waiting for an answer, slamming the door behind her.

He sighed, remembering the two teenagers he had already raised, knowing to give her more time. Tomorrow he would row her back to the camp and they would find Piotr, and maybe even have some food with Vitaly’s friends.

The next morning she was gone.

He woke in the middle of the night from dreams of swimming to find that the water had reached the second floor. He climbed out of bed and swore, stepping into warm and murky seawater that now formed an inch-high layer over the carpet and rug. He splashed to the window in disbelief and was shocked to see the waters lapping just under the windowsill. Another tidal surge had taken the ground floor from him while he slept, and he hadn’t even stirred.

Over the preceding days the waters had risen slowly and he had navigated the lower half of the house in rubber boots, then waders, but that was now impossible. Small waves jostled flotsam at the top of the staircase outside the bedrooms, and he was irrationally glad that they had moved all of their treasured possessions upstairs. But his boat was too small and the ocean would take everything it couldn’t carry.

“Nina, we have to leave!” he called, went into her room when there was no answer, and found only an open window waiting for him, that and a note written in her looping hand on the bed.

Through the window he could see his boat. The dinghy they had dragged behind it was gone.

He stood at the window, calling her name into the dark, knowing to paddle out into the night would be futile and praying she was still near and would return.

She did not.

Yuri went through the top floor—the last floor—of the house, surveying the remains of their lives, the memories imbued in even the smallest cushion or knick-knack. The humidity and the moisture that accompanied the flood made him feel puffy and weak, but even though he hadn't worked the sea for a decade or more he knew that he still had reserves of strength, knew that he would find her.

He went to the chest of drawers in Ana's dressing room, noting with dismay the water seeping under the wardrobe door. She had no further need for the dresses and skirts and coats she had so loved, but he winced at the reminder that he would never see her wear them again. The chest was a simple artisan piece, plain oak with no varnish, but they had called it their treasure chest and so it was.

He lifted her rings from the first drawer. He took a key from the cord he wore round his neck and added Ana's engagement and wedding rings in its place before he fastened the knot once more. The key opened the middle drawer, which contained four jewellery boxes, once so important and secret. Three were empty, but he took the fourth, checked its smooth, shimmering contents, and carried it back to the bedroom and placed it at the bottom of the canvas rucksack that was his ready-to-go bag. He quickly gathered a few other things—the artist's sketch of the family at the agricultural show when the children were young; their first hand paintings; a few other keepsakes—wrapped them in an oilskin, then took the loaf of bread and dried food he kept on the highest bookshelf and placed them all on top.

He no longer changed to sleep so he was already dressed, but he added another thick sweater to the bag and some of Nina's clothes. He imagined her in the sea, lost and dangerously unprepared, then shook away that terrible thought.

Finally, he collected the dagger with the scrimshawed handle and the pistol, shot and gunpowder he had taken to keeping beside the bed for emergencies. These too he wrapped in waterproof cloth and placed at the top of the rucksack. Then he went back to Nina's room, to the window and the boat.

He searched for days, and as he did so the city became more and more an uncharted territory. The unforgiving sea quickly obliterated familiar areas. On the day after Nina left, he lost his bearings and rowed for hours through the flotsam and debris that

swirled through the streets. He eventually recognised the alley where he and Ana had opened their first business, and where Ana had nearly lost Vitaly before he was even born. The doctor's office that had saved both lives was long since gone, but the building it had occupied still stood forlornly in the water, half-collapsed and leaning.

Other people also persisted in living in the town despite the rising waters, and Yuri was as likely to be met by weapons as a friendly "hello" when he approached to ask if anyone had seen a girl in a coracle. Criminals roamed the new canals. Most were not water people, though, and as more and more streets became submerged the thieves and burglars moved up to the camps to try their hands at pickpocketry.

The heat of their last day as a family had been no fluke; the deluge changed the climate of the town, making it easily ten degrees warmer. Each day he searched, the hazy humidity quickly brought on a sweat, and with the droplets trickling down his forehead Yuri felt inadequate to his task.

He cursed himself for his passivity. In the face of tragedy, he had pushed the children away and retreated to his home as if waiting to die. Whatever their problems, Ana wouldn't have wanted that.

On the fifth day of his search, he circled back to the submerged house and was hailed at the end of his block by a cracked and ancient voice. The old woman, Marissa, was sitting on the flat roof of her house in a wooden garden chair. She smiled a toothless grin and invited him to join her for a cup of tea. Her house was submerged to the top of the highest windows, so he tied the boat to the guttering and stepped onto the roof.

She had a portable stove with several large flasks spread around it. He nodded at her. "You seem well prepared for the end of the world."

She laughed. "My King has come for me at last. There's no reason to flee." Her grin was impish, and he wondered if the cataclysm had brought madness.

"You're happy that the King Under the Sea wants to kill us all?"

He didn't mean to goad her, and immediately regretted his tone, but she took no offence. "My boy, all of this once belonged to him. The dry people only held it in trust for as long as he was satisfied. Now he's had enough!"

She raised the cup of tea, gesturing for Yuri to pour himself some, which he did. "Some say we took too many of his fish, others blame the army because they went for his treasures with their bathyspheres and submersibles. I say he just wants it back!"

The tea was good and Yuri savoured it for a moment before responding. "And you think that justifies all this? How do we know where the water will stop?"

“I don’t think it will. The King has been searching for his daughter for a long time. If she’s not in the sea, she must be on land—and how can he forgive that? His anger is ancient and terrible and he will have his vengeance. Would you stop at anything for that little girl of yours?”

Yuri had no response, so he refilled their cups instead. “It needs milk. Where are all the cows, Marissa?”

With a giggle she responded, “Well, I saw one float past yesterday, but I don’t think she was giving milk any more.” She smiled. “He was always kind to me, you know? When I fished, I made the proper obeisances and my catch was always good. When my poor Nept passed on, we committed him to the sea, and thanked the King for the time we’d had and the children he’d allowed us. Do you think the modern folk do that? Did you remember your obligations, Yuri?”

He contemplated her words. “We paid our dues and made the sacrifices when the children were born. Ana was… Ana was a free spirit, and submitted to none. Not even her husband,” he added wryly.

Marissa chuckled and though she continued to smile her tone became serious. “The navy has come overland from the farthest shore. Did you hear them, last night? Those lads and lasses who came past yesterday with their guns and their big boat? They want to turn him back, but it will be futile. Nothing stops the sea, in the end.”

“A reckoning. Do you not think there’s a chance?”

“None,” she said. “The King’s coming. He’ll take me down when he’s good and ready, and then I’ll see Nept, and be young again forever. Now, where are you off to in your silly little craft?”

“Nina is still out there, looking for her mother.” The old body finally stopped smiling, showing a concern for the child that she hadn’t for the rest of the people. “Have you seen her? Since the evacuation, I mean?”

She nodded, and replied quite matter of factly. “I have.”

Yuri’s heart leapt. “Why didn’t you tell me? How did she look? Was she well? Had anyone hurt her?”

“She swept along here two days past. Didn’t stop to say hello or anything. Quite rude, if you ask me. Looked like she’d come into her maturity. I was surprised to see her above the water.”

He shook his head and sighed. “No, Marissa, I meant my daughter, not… not whatever you saw.”

They were interrupted by the distant wail of a siren blowing from landward, and the sound of distant engines. Yuri made his apologies, explaining that he had to find her before the marines came and the real war began. As he rowed away, she shouted after him. He thought she said to mind the King, but her words were carried away on the ocean breeze and he didn’t catch them.

He didn’t find Nina that day either.

The next day he let a tidal current take him down towards the harbour.

He couldn’t recognise the streets from their rooftops any more. An eerie calm had taken hold and a low mist blocked his view landwards, where he presumed armies were massing. The humidity was cloying, and every stroke of his paddle brought more perspiration to his forehead.

He heard the distant, ululating cries of the undines, and thanked the gods that none of the King Under the Sea’s creatures were roaming nearby. He did not see a single human, or rather, none living. Every now and then a corpse floated past. He thought he had been hardened to suffering and death during his time as a soldier, before he married, but the first body of a child disabused him of this notion. Bloated and face down, he could not tell its age or sex, only that it was too small to be Nina.

He used the paddle to fend off debris and bodies, but occasionally the currents allowed him some choice in the route he was taking, to keep away from the torrents and whirlpools. He was as terrified of moving too fast and being swept beyond her as he was of seeing her from afar but being unable to catch up.

From time to time he called out a cautious “hello” in the hope that, if his daughter were nearby, she’d hear him, and that if she were not, a straggler or attic-survivalist might reply instead, and he could ask them for any news or sightings.

He found no one.

The current eased on a street with many of its upper storeys still above the water line, and he paddled from side to side, peering through windows into the flooded remains of people’s lives. He saw floating furniture, particularly beds but also desks and papers, and once a wardrobe floating on its side which he briefly contemplated checking for dry clothing.

He was startled twice by a great serpent that weaved from house to house, above and below the water, finding its own way through doors and windows, before rejoining the

main waterway just as Yuri arrived to make his own inspection. It seemed uninterested in him but kept pace with his movements, and when he explored the left side of the street, it occupied the right.

The flood had opened up a new territory for the King. Even the sea creatures that were not directly under his dominion must be exploring, he mused. Were there any that owed him no allegiance? The common belief was that he commanded all life in the water, but as the child of a fisherwoman and a stevedore, Yuri knew that the truth was much more complicated. The schools of fish that had already reclaimed this street owed the King nothing , and to him, they were just snacks or bait.

Yuri peered through a veranda window, taking in the sodden finery that now dressed an aquarium. How quickly the borders shift. He recognised the ornate green and red embroidery of the robes once worn by one of his old clients and realised that he had visited this house before. He wondered if Rylana and her husband had made it out of the city, but stopped himself there. If he thought about each of his friends he would lose focus—his only concern was retrieving Nina and returning her to land to join her brothers.

At the end of the block, the current resumed its drive, taking him toward the harbour. His companion serpent moved off in a different direction.

Splashing and shouting broke the stillness of the morning, the first human voices he'd heard since Marissa. But there were other voices too—indistinct, but definitely inhuman.

He began to row towards the sounds, the water pulling him on as if impatient with his meandering search pattern. If the current wanted to help him towards the noises, then he would let it.

In the distance, Yuri saw what he had been searching for: Nina's little dinghy, heading for the Mariners' Temple. Its tall steeple still towered above the waters, and next to it stood a six-storey harbour-front building whose upper floors still rose proudly above the flood. Nina must have been checking the tallest buildings and, as he rowed, he cursed his stupidity. She had no reason to expect her mother to stay at sea level. He had been looking in the wrong places!

Three monstrous undines surrounded the tiny boat, towering over the gunwales, their bladderwrack-hair spread down to the water around. They flipped their huge and muscular tails to create a wave that would capsize the boat, and their taunting cackles and hoots suggested they were enjoying it. Yuri rowed as fast as he could, but the current tried to veer him off course.

Nina shouted and cursed at the undines, and he felt a twinge of pride that they had

raised a girl who would fight with the children of the sea. Battling onwards, he saw her leap from her coracle just as two of the creatures grabbed the edge of the little craft and held it down so that it took on water. She landed with a splash and his heart sank, but she waded along the top of an unseen surface, then leapt again onto the barely submerged roof of the temple.

She ran along the wooden roof as though walking on water, chased by one of the undines towards the steeple. She stumbled, slowing for just half a second to wipe spray from her face, and the undine was on top of her.

Yuri could do nothing except paddle his hardest, but he knew he was going to be too late. The undines were ferocious and unrelenting.

Closer now, but not close enough. The undine was standing upon her tail, her hands wrapped round Nina's throat, water glistening on her scales. He wouldn't make it in time. She was pressed up against the wall of the steeple and was desperately batting at the creature's face.

"The eyes, Nina, the eyes!" he screamed.

He didn't know whether she had heard him, but if not then the same idea had occurred to her. With one hand she pulled on a long string of the black, pustular hair and with the other she began to gouge at one of its eyes until, with the most hideous screech, it let her go. She kicked it as it dropped backwards into the water.

Yuri sprang up in his boat, shouting with excitement and relief—then almost fell from it as the current swirled violently beneath him, threatening to flip it over until he crouched and leaned against the tilt.

When he was able to look again, he saw the undines circling like sharks… but no sign of Nina. He howled in anguish and frustration as he reached the temple roof and leapt from the boat, rucksack in hand. He struggled with the buckles, desperate for the pistol, wishing he had loaded it, angry at his own caution.

Looking up, he spotted Nina trying to climb the steeple, then the roof shook as two of the undines slithered out of the water in pursuit. One caught her leg and let out a triumphant cry as it pulled her off the wall, kicking and shouting. Her booted foot caught it in the face, but the other one had her. Together they dragged her into the water and carried her down into the deep.

Shots rang out. A musket ball whistled past his face and he dropped to his knees. A skiff glided between the nearby houses, two musketeers riding in its prow. One of them shouted, "Avast there!" but his voice broke, no more convincing a mariner than the woman holding the other gun and desperately reloading.

Yuri stood again and shouted incoherently, “The undines! My daughter! Nina!”

Turning back to the water, he found himself confronted by another undine, larger than the others. Up on its fishlike tail, the creature screeched, raised its great webbed hands and thrust him to his knees. All thought of his weapons forgotten, Yuri gawped at its inhuman musculature, the whorled tattoos that covered its chest and the light catching the scales on its shoulders. It stank of musk and sweat and fish and the sea; his head reeled.

“Please, no!” Yuri wailed, cowering as it raised its arm to deliver the killing blow.

But the soldiers had managed to reload, and the skiff had closed the range so that their next shots hit the undine in the stomach. It yelled with a surprisingly human voice and collapsed in front of him, forcing Yuri to scrabble backwards across the roof to avoid the splash of bright red blood.

It rose up again, its face filled with rage and pain, but no fear.

“You’ll never see her again,” it hissed, “she is the King’s.” Then it slid into the water as if the wound was nothing, following its siblings down to wherever they had taken Nina.

Yuri began to sob, head in hands, his whole body shaking. He was still crying when the marines pulled up next to the temple and shook him roughly. The woman eventually pulled his hands away and slapped him across the cheek.

“My name is Sergeant Botkina,” she said. “Control yourself. Stop weeping.”

Yuri wiped his sleeve across his eyes. Botkina looked more like a harbour alley rat than a soldier, her patchwork uniform pieced together from a dozen different companies. Her arms were covered in tattoos, optimistic attempts to disguise old gang affiliations with tokens of her service—the dates of battles she had survived, the Marine’s symbolic anchor, the emperor’s sigil. Even with all that, she looked less than half his age.

She was patient with him and gave him water. He sensed the skills of an expert interrogator behind her sympathy and concern, but he told her about Nina and her foolish quest to find her lost mother, and how she was down there, if only he could get to her.

Botkina nodded, then reached out and tousled his hair, as if their ages were reversed. “It’s a good thing you’re not one of those sympathisers. We shot an old girl an hour ago just for that.”

Yuri was already asking whether they had any diving equipment on the skiff before he realised that Botkina meant they had shot Marissa. He realised that one of the markings obscured by the new ink looked very like the King's trident, and he wondered how she could so coldly change sides. The inundation had forced everyone to pick their loyalties anew, he supposed. He paused, swallowed hard, but then pressed on. "I've got to go down there to rescue Nina."

The soldiers exchanged glances among themselves before one of them, a cold-faced northerner whose face was still red-raw with scratches said, "She's gone, fella. Been down there too long. The King has her now."

"That's what I'm afraid of," he replied. They had taken his rucksack, but he beckoned for it, and one of the soldiers eventually took pity on him and handed it back.

"Keepsakes of my children," he explained, in case they wondered, lifting out the clothes, carefully placing the weapons to one side so that the soldiers could see he meant no harm.

He located the precious box, lifted it from the rucksack, and unlocked the clasp. He looked at its contents again, tears flowing freely. The soldiers drifted to the other side of the temple to consider their next move, discussing whether to make camp on the roof of the taller building.

"That was where my daughter thought she'd find her mother," he blubbered and, embarrassed, they turned away to give the broken man a semblance of privacy. Then, seizing his chance, with the box clasped tightly to him, he moved to the edge of the roof, lay down and pushed his head under the water.

He opened his eyes but could see nothing. He wondered how far sound might carry under the waves as he screamed for his wife, screamed for Ana.

It was an admission of defeat, of failure, and of love.

The Marines pulled him out of the water with a cheeriness that suggested they had expected him to attempt to take his own life. They must have seen so many fractured families, he thought, as they picked him up and helped him change into some of the dry clothes in his rucksack. They even helped him pack it back up, weapons and all. If they looked inside the jewellery box, they said nothing.

They led him back to the skiff and rowed him over to the tall building. They climbed in via one of the upper windows, and made their way through each room until they found the stairwell. The building had been looted on the dry levels, the floor strewn with papers and detritus. The local cat population had also moved in, rather than learn to swim.

The soldiers gathered papers and other flammable materials as they made their way to the roof, then set about making a fire. Sergeant Botkina made a show of looking after Yuri but the others weren't interested, and he could tell that he had become a burden they didn't need. He suspected it was much easier to shoot those who had stayed behind to await the King's welcome.

From up high they could see the sea creatures gathering around the King's great maelstrom, and the naval flotilla moving towards it. The soldiers pointed out where they had seen artillery positions set up in the distant meadows, forcing the refugees out, and they all cheered when the shelling to support the fleet began.

Yuri wondered about the efficacy of explosives and shells, but a gruff and sly-looking soldier told him that they were using a special kind of bomb, called a depth charge.

"How can they take on the god of the sea?" he asked, genuinely shocked by their hubris.

"The top brass tell us that he's not a god," Botkina replied, "just another old sea creature, like a giant squid, or a great blue whale. We've all seen their carcasses washed up on the shore, so if they can die, so can he…"

"You were raised by the water, weren't you, Sergeant? I can tell from your tatts." He showed her the similar markings on his upper arm, the gull and the vortex. "Does that sound right to you?"

She just shrugged and turned away, afraid to appear parochial in front of her men.

The battle played out over the next hour. They were powerless to intervene, but the men kept up a running commentary about the commanders of each sloop and frigate. Most of it was probably half-remembered gossip, but it allowed them to distance themselves from what they were seeing as, one by one, their comrades died. When some vast unseen beast reached from the deep and pulled down the first cruiser, it astonished them all, but they could blame the disaster on a poor helmsman. And when the undines swarmed and holed a frigate, well, it was surely because the captain didn't treat his marines right.

Gradually, they said less and less, simply bearing witness as the fiasco became a rout. The end came when a huge and terrible leviathan rose out of the water, grasped the mid-section of the flagship and dragged it straight into the King's vortex.

The soldiers took off their hats and helmets. The sergeant declared, "Well, that's that, then," and the cynical and aggressive soldiers hugged as they wept.

The hour after the battle was fraught, as undines and other sea creatures hunted and killed any surviving mariners. The weather started to change. Yuri noticed that the water levels had begun to rise again, and wished that he had taken the children and gone to spend his final few months fleeing to the mountains.

“What is the King Under the Sea?” asked Botkina. She’d been stripping her uniform of its badges and insignia and throwing them into the fire.

“That is,” Yuri said, and pointed towards the place where the sea met the sky. It was darker now, topped by foam. A great wave was forming, dominating the skyline. It met the clouds and obliterated everything else, still far distant, but inexorably coming to claim the land again.

“That is the King,” he said. “The one who cannot be defied.”

And then out of the becalmed waters before them rose Ana: imperious, beautiful and terrible. Yuri had only seen her transformed like this on a few occasions, but he still felt joy and love despite the scales and fins and seaweed, despite her leaving him. The soldiers reached for their guns, though she was twice the size of the undines they had fought off earlier.

Ana opened her arms to reveal Nina, cradled in a giant Crassatella shell, and his heart surged with hope.

Ana laughed, and it was the barking of a seal, and the clicking of a dolphin, and the song of a siren. He began to smile, then to laugh with her. He danced and capered, and pushed the soldiers’ rifles down, crying, “It’s my wife! She’s my wife!”

At that, they pointed the rifles at him, but he ignored them and rummaged for the box in the rucksack. He broke the lid as he scrambled to undo the fastening, but it didn’t matter. There was no future on land for his daughter.

He lifted from the box a garment that was, at first glance, a beautifully sequinned dress that glistened in the noonday sun.

He had kept it hidden in the house since the day she’d been born, along with those of her brothers. He had watched the three garments grow as the children grew. He’d moved them to new secret places every time the children explored and played near the latest hidey-hole.

On their sixteenth birthdays ,he had explained to Vitaly and Piotr the significance of their heritage, and Ana had then taken them down to the water and showed them exactly what it entailed. Both of the boys had made their choice.

There was no name for what Ana was. Some days she was a sinuous grey seal, others the queen of the undines. Some days she was the mother of their children, others the daughter of a king. Most of the time she was just Ana—the girl he had met on his skiff in the middle of nowhere, then found again living in the gutters of the land, and then married.

When she spoke, it was the sound of the tide on pebbles, the waves breaking on the shore. “It’s too late, my love, too late.”

The marines ran for their boat. The sergeant called out to him, begging him to grab the girl and climb aboard, but Yuri knew now that it was futile for he could see what Ana had promised.

He went to her, and she was suddenly herself, and he folded her lithe human form in a long-sought embrace, nuzzling her neck, telling her that he had missed her.

“It’s no good, old man,” she said. “When they took Nina, I had to come out of hiding and go to my father. He’ll let our child live, but there’s no hope for anyone else.”

“No hope for the boys?” He replied.

“No respite from the King.” Then she pulled him close and said, “Help me dress her.”

They slowly clothed their unconscious daughter in the gown of scales and shells. As they did so, her countenance began to shift and blur, as it had for her brothers. Yuri stroked her cheek and kissed her forehead. “She’ll be fine in the world to come, now she has her skin. And maybe Piotr and Vitaly will wear theirs once more.”

Ana nodded, but didn’t smile. Yuri fervently hoped that the boys had kept their heritage close.

The tsunami dominated the skyline now. He had no idea when it would hit, but it would be soon, and he could not imagine the King would ever let the waters roll back.

If it were to break, and subside, what would be left of all that they had built on the land if the Gods were angry?

He slowly lowered himself to the high roof, cradling his daughter. Nina woke, just then, and he smiled at her.

“Your mother’s back,” he said.