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# Subduction

*By Paul M. Berger*

**T**HE CREATURE HAD CRAWLED up onto the shore to die. Oliver stopped on the stony beach and considered the corpse, tangled among the driftwood and ribbons of old kelp. He supposed it could have been a type of fish. He recalled there were deep-sea dwellers with similar nightmare shapes, eel-bodies behind bulbous heads, mouths that were baskets of jutting needle-teeth. He didn't know how he knew that, but he did.

Only, this thing looked too clumsy to be much of a swimmer. And something about the heavy, blood-red scales suggested that even the bottommost depths of the sea might be too shallow for it, and what it really preferred was an impossible realm far thicker and hotter and hundreds of miles deeper, worming through a vast, slow-swirling world where the pressure made solid rock flow like molasses.

Something in the back of Oliver's mind rumbled — perhaps a warning, perhaps resentment.

It was bewildering, but that was nothing new; Oliver added the dead beast to the expanding list of things he knew he couldn't remember. By

now the frustration and the fury barely made themselves heard; he had grown used to telling himself that some day, when the time was right, his past would all come back to him. He focused on the bands of fog weaving among the spruce that sloped down to the water's edge, and he let the cool grays and muted greens soothe his thoughts. From somewhere just out of sight came the *chuff... chuff...* of a pod of orcas pursuing salmon into the shallows.

Then, without warning, the island beneath his feet jumped and quivered as if it had been kicked from below. Gravel rattled past stones, and the trees shimmied and whispered. Oliver went rigid for the count of eight heartbeats until the tremor passed. Something familiar had found him, and he added it to a new list, the inventory of things that made him afraid.

The island of Macquarie had a seedy harbor where its residents docked the boats that pursued North Pacific salmon and halibut, and a single small town that had never known any real prosperity or charm, and a hilly wooded interior punctuated at random but frequent intervals by marijuana farms. Oliver had been there three days, and he couldn't have explained why he stopped running when he reached it, other than to say there was a familiar feel in the earth and air. This made no sense, as the evidence suggested he was from Southern California.

He cut through town. It was too early for half the stores to open yet, and he found himself heading toward a bakery in the middle of the block. It was a narrow sliver of a shop wedged between two larger storefronts that half-hid it, invisible from certain angles. In a bigger, more anonymous city it would have been the type of quirky place that people could only find if they stumbled upon it, or if it chose to be found. The warm scent of baking bread beckoned. Oliver went in.

The place was a little too quaint for Macquarie, as if it was aimed at the tourist trade that never came and had to make do with the rough crews off the boats instead. The back of the shop went a long way in, and a dark-haired woman came forward when the bell on the door jangled. Oliver thought it might have jangled a moment *after* he shut the door, but he was distracted — the shelves were heavy with fresh loaves of bread and muffins, and the air was thick with their scent. The woman looked flushed, and Oliver deduced that the ovens were back there.

"Hello!" she said, looking him over. "I don't know you."

"I suppose not," he said. "I'm just passing through." That much was probably true. After a pause, he added, "My name's Oliver."

"Nice to meet you, Oliver. I'm Moira."

She regarded him like she wanted him to say more, or maybe small talk was just expected here, so he managed, "Do you know everyone who comes through here?"

"Well, not many people 'come through' in winter," she said. "But I do like to know my clientele."

She was pretty, and looked to Oliver like she was a few years older than he, thirtyish or so. She had freckles across the top of her cheeks and delicate laugh lines around her eyes. Maybe a healthy late-thirties. There was a streak of flour across her temple where she had wiped off sweat with the back of her hand.

She leaned on the counter while they spoke. She had a way of holding Oliver's eyes with hers just a bit longer than necessary. He hoped she wasn't flirting with him, because it just wasn't in him, and he'd be embarrassed for them both.

Her eyes were a dark blue, almost violet, that he didn't think was common. But the act of looking into them brought up a scrap of recollection, of looking into hazel eyes, a woman's. There was no context other than that it had been a familiar act, and a comforting one. The fragment was unnerving.

He noticed the baguettes in the rack were so new they were still steaming in the cool air he had let in.

"I guess I'll take one of those," he said. His money would last a few more days, if he was careful with it.

He had nothing to put on the bread, but he envisioned himself tearing off hunks and eating it like pastry. Oliver paid and left the shop with his baguette, still unsure if there was something she wanted from him.

Five paces down the sidewalk, he made up his mind and went back into the bakery. Moira was still at the counter, and she raised an eyebrow at him.

"Did you call me?" he asked.

She folded her arms. "I didn't say anything."

"No, not just now...and not like that." There were no good words for


what he meant. "When I was walking by, it was like there was an invitation in the air. And when we speak, there's something coming off you, like a...power, that fills this shop. So I was wondering, were you calling me?"

She looked Oliver over again, with more attention. "Huh. Do you feel things like that a lot?"

"No," he said. "Actually, I don't know."

Her eyes widened. "Well, I'm flattered." She dropped a muffin smelling of banana and chocolate half as big as his head into a paper bag and passed it to him, no charge. "You come back soon. Even if it's just to shoot the shit. Any time."

Oliver had to shift both parcels to one hand in order to work the heavy brass door latch. He went out and found a bare crag on the hill overlooking town, where he sat down to watch the traffic and the people. He had finished the muffin and half the day had gone by before he realized Moira had never answered his question.

LIVER'S OLDEST MEMORY, the first thing he could recall, was from four weeks ago. When his awareness began, he was pressing his face against the plate glass in the waiting room of the Boca Gusano bus station, and there was nothing he recognized about himself or the world except an inexpressible sense of loss. Something had been torn from him, but he couldn't say what, or how much — it might have been everything. He slumped to his knees and huddled there, weeping.

A woman with kind eyes and no-nonsense clothes asked his name, which he didn't know until they examined his driver's license together. She drove him across town to the address printed on it, but the building had been one of those reduced to rubble in the vicious earthquakes that had struck the city over the last week. The site offered no clues to his past, his ties, or his personality.

He was untethered and formless, and he would have followed the woman anywhere. She ran a little church that had a handyman's dormitory of sorts behind it, where she let him stay. She believed him to be one of the young men who came to town expressly to surf and use drugs, and who occasionally went too far and experienced psychotic breaks. She had

seen it before. She made it clear that his room and board depended on his progressive contrition and acknowledgment of his sins.

But some urgent wordless opposition told him he had no cause for any apology, and that he would find no answers in the lively dry air and clear light of Boca Gusano. If he didn't go soon, it would not let him breathe there.

He had been wearing a fancy wristwatch when he awoke. The back was inscribed:

*To my hero — E.*

He ran his thumb over the engraved words for hours, trying to capture some sense of who *E* might be, but there was no longer any image or feeling connected with the initial.

He pawned the watch — and got more than he expected for it, which told him it was even more valuable than that — and bought a Greyhound ticket. He spent three days on buses, riding north along the coast. When he had gone as far as he could go without a passport, he took ferries to the west, and then hitched rides between scattered fog-ribboned islands on little fishing boats that took a casual approach to the border.

The drive to keep moving dissolved the moment Oliver stepped onto the dock at Macquarie. The quiet stillness and cool, moist climate were diametrically different from the city he had left, but he sensed something waiting for him here. He asked around and learned that the man who ran the hardware store had a room he sometimes let out in his apartment above the shop.

Jacob shrugged when Oliver inquired if the room was available and said, "Just don't be an asshole and we'll get along fine, eh."

The old man was plump, patchy-bearded, and talkative. He was a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw tribe, and he made a show of offense when Oliver mistakenly referred to him as a Kwakiutl, then generously let it pass. He fancied himself an artist and an entrepreneur. He had a soot-colored half-feral cat that he doted on, which dropped by most days to allow him to feed it.

The dim little room contained a cot and a closet and a bureau, which was more than Oliver needed. There were a few worn shirts and jeans already hanging in the closet, different sizes, but mostly too big for him.

"You're welcome to anything there you like," Jacob said. "Previous

occupants'. The guys I get bunking here tend to be the type who leave town on short notice. No matter to me, though — rent's due up front. You any good with a hammer?"

Oliver had slim, soft hands with no calluses or scars. "Probably not."

Jacob appeared to grasp that he was not aloof, but that he was struggling with something and simply could not hold up his end of the conversation. That satisfied him; he didn't pry.

Oliver slept as little as possible, because he often awoke from nightmares he couldn't remember. He looked at every new thing intently and turned each new name over on his tongue, hoping it would bring to mind a familiar shape or an old habit. Random objects evoked strange responses in him, and he found he became enraged at the sight of ice-skaters, and chains of jewels, or kites with long tails.

For three days he walked along the shoreline or just sat, watching the dark water and the mist curling through the evergreens, and waiting for the calm to allow some piece of his past to trickle back up to him.

Close to dusk, when Moira's muffin was long gone and not much remained of the baguette, another tremor charged through the stony hillside. Somewhere deep below the island, the little Juan de Fuca tectonic plate was colliding against the piece of the Earth's crust that comprised the whole of North America. The long, slow impact had shaped this coast, but he knew without conscious thought that the continent was riding up and over the ground Macquarie stood upon, driving it down, forcing it from existence, hiding it deep out of sight within the Earth's mantle. That subduction never occurred without a struggle, though. When the planet wrestled with itself there would be slips and elastic spasms that unleashed earthquakes and awakened volcanoes — and the puny living things that walked on the surface would be reminded of their insignificance and impotence.

Oliver was curled in a ball, his eyes screwed closed so tight they ached like bruises. Yet a small piece of him, remote and cool despite the terror, wondered why this should be familiar when so much else had been taken from him.

After the earth quieted, he headed weak-kneed back to town. On his

way to Jacob's, he stopped to peer into the bakery, but the shop was locked and the windows showed only dark reflections.

He turned away and collided with a man who had stepped close behind him. Oliver was rocked back on his heels. The man pressed closer.

"You can just fucking forget all about that right now," the man said.

"What?"

"I know what you're up to, and I will bring a world of pain down on your ass if you try it." He was twice as broad as Oliver and a head taller.

"I don't know what you mean," Oliver stammered.

"Then I'll make it simple for you," he said, shoving Oliver in the chest with each sentence. "You don't go into that fucking bakery again. You don't talk to her again. And if you ever touch any part of her I will tear your head off your scrawny neck and bait my hooks with it. Got it?"

The question was clearly rhetorical, so Oliver said he got it.

"Good. That was your only warning." The man shoved Oliver again and let him walk around him.

It was nearly dark by the time Oliver reached the hardware store. As he approached, Jacob's cat darted away from him down the alley. It looked back to challenge his gaze and it seemed to Oliver that a red eel-shape dangled from its jaws. The cat growled at him through its clenched teeth, a low threat, then turned and sauntered into the shadows.

Inside the apartment, Jacob had clutter spread across the kitchen table. His laptop was open at his elbow, to catch messages about the sale of a house in Vancouver he was brokering. He was working on a half-painted Kwakwaka'wakw dance mask, carved from cedar, bigger than a motorcycle helmet. It portrayed a hero's face, the brows knitted, the lips pursed in prayer or song.

"Hiya," Jacob said. "You want a toke?"

Oliver reckoned there was a chance it might help, but probably not. "No thanks."

"Suit yourself. Watch this," Jacob said. He held up the mask and pulled the bark-fiber cords that dangled from the back of the head. The two halves of the face spread like hinged doors, revealing a second, inner mask — it might have been a whiskered snake, or a scaled wolf. The open panels

framed the face with dark ripples or currents. "Cool, eh? My people are big on transformation tales."

"What does it mean?" Oliver asked.

"Well, it's a family story, part of the clan identity. A lawyer would call it proprietary, but it goes back older than lawyers. It's not the type of thing we can just go telling to any outsider."

Oliver's thoughts went to the creature he had seen on the shore that morning and again in the alley.

"Have you ever seen anything weird around here?" he asked.

Jacob scratched under his beard. "No."

Oliver considered that, then changed the subject. "I ran into a guy this evening," he said.

"What sort of a guy?"

"A pretty big guy. He told me to stay away from the bakery."

"Ah. That would be Sean Fenton. And that would mean you met Moira." Jacob's eyebrows waggled. "What'd you think?"

"He looked pretty pissed off to me."

"Not him, sissy-boy, her."

"She seemed...nice."

"She's better than nice, you ask me. Did you get a look at her ass?"

"But she's with Sean."

"Not even close. Not ever, as far as I can tell. She doesn't care much for the local boys. What Moira likes is the guys who come onto the island from across the border to do a little bit of quick business then disappear. No complications, eh. That's good news for you, if you ask me. Did she show any interest?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"You want my advice, I say go for it." Jacob smirked. "And then come back and tell me all about it, because I've been picturing it for years."

"And what about Sean?"

"You give Moira your best shot and let her worry about Sean. He'll make intimidating noises and maybe crush a few things for show, but he can't touch you long as you're with her."

Oliver went walking again the next day. He avoided the bakery, though he wasn't sure if it was because of Sean or because of Moira.



Instead, he continued his exploration of the island's shoreline. Macquarie was roughly comma-shaped, and the stony hills plunged sharply into the strait around the majority of its perimeter. His walk took him high above the glassy water.

The island bucked with another tremor as Oliver returned to town that evening, longer and angrier than the previous ones. He was overtaken by the urge to flee, to find someplace to hide from it, but his legs refused to obey him and he stood helpless in place. Somewhere a man or a woman screamed once, briefly. Some structure, a sign or a lamppost, crashed down. The street split and the two sides jumped a foot apart. He heard windows shatter on Main Street, and people wordlessly watched each other's faces until it was over. Only then did he notice he had been gripping a chain-link fence so tightly his fingers were bleeding.

Outside the hardware store, Oliver saw something red and sinuous trot into the gloom of the alley on stubby legs. It turned to regard him from the shadows and it seemed to him that it might have had Jacob's cat dangling from its mouth. Oliver met its piscine stare and for a moment a sensation came bubbling up — an image of strangling, stifling pressure, as if the mass of an entire planet were pressing down around him, but retreating and gradually falling away — and he was filled with a sense of complete freedom and a fierce, deadly joy. The creature turned and disappeared deeper into the alley. Something inside Oliver grumbled and demanded that he pursue and destroy it. He forced himself to look away.

Inside the shop, Jacob was sweeping up boxes of washers that had burst against the floor. His lips were pursed and he shot Oliver a quick hard look as he entered, then bent over his broom again.

"Does Macquarie get a lot of earthquakes?" Oliver asked.

"Not for a while. And not many like this," the old man said, half to himself. "But it doesn't take a genius to know a big one's gonna catch us real soon, if we're not careful."

Oliver started up the stairs. Jacob called after him.

"Kid — I'm in no mood for company, and I'm going to want the place to myself tonight. Make sure you're scarce by the time I get up there."

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"Where the hell does everyone else go around here when they can't go home? Sorley's."

That was the pub the men off the boats used. Oliver didn't think he could handle conversation yet, but at least they weren't likely to approach him. He washed up and hunted for a change of clothes.

He found a left-behind shirt hanging in his closet that wasn't too big for him, then inspected the bureau. The little top drawer had a few pairs of socks, a handful of loose change (from both sides of the border), and an old, slim jackknife. The jugged bone handle was faintly luminous with wear, but the main blade was clean and sharp and it snicked open and closed smoothly. Somebody had inherited it and taken care to keep it oiled and free of rust.

Oliver could see someone abandoning the old clothes, but the little knife didn't look like the type of thing that would be willingly left behind. Someone must have had to get off the island in a hurry, he thought. Maybe a dope deal gone wrong. Moira and Sean Fenton also came to mind.

He walked to the bar, which was directly across the street from Moira's bakery. It was an ugly space and not quite dim enough to hide it. A few small groups of fishermen talked and joked. They were loud, but it sounded strained to Oliver, as if they were trying to banish the memory of the earthquake. He ordered a beer and took half an hour to drink it as he eavesdropped on their conversations, none of which he cared about. They ignored him.

"Well, hello, Oliver." Moira slipped onto a stool, close enough to brush his thigh with her own.

"Hey," he said, surprised.

"Hey," she murmured in his ear. "Buy a girl a drink?"

He did.

"So, Oliver, where are you from?" Moira asked.

"California. A little city you probably never heard of, unless you surf. Boca Gusano."

Her eyebrows rose for a moment. "So what brings you to our island paradise?"

"I was...on the road for a while, and this felt like a good place to catch my breath." Which was true enough.

"You'll be moving on, then?"

"Well..." Moira had looked good to him the other day in the bakery, but she cleaned up even better. Suddenly he was aware of the warm places

where her body nearly touched his and he remembered what Jacob had said about her tastes. "Soon, probably."

Her options on Macquarie must have been pretty limited, because Moira tossed her hair behind her ear and laughed at nearly everything Oliver said. She gave him her full attention and a direct, intimate smile that went straight to his core and left him warm, comfortable, and very aroused.

She finished her beer and suggested whiskey. Oliver lost track of how many rounds she had him buy. She brushed her fingertips down his forearm and commanded him to order again.

Finally, when he was about to slide off his stool, she whispered, "Okay, let's get out of here." He had to lean into her to stand up. A man's face caught his eye, and with an effort he focused on Sean Fenton glaring at him from a table across the room.

The part of Oliver's brain tasked with rational thought was embedded deep within a wad of soft bread dough, but it made his mouth say, "Isn't that your boyfriend?"

"Who, Sean? Don't worry about him. He can't do anything now."

A muscle jumped in Sean's jaw as they passed him, but he sat rigid and didn't even turn to watch them go.

Moira led Oliver out and they staggered to her car. She paused to kiss him as she put him into the passenger seat and somehow managed to drive them back to her house without running them into a ditch.

There were candles already burning when they got inside.

"You wait right here," she said, and pushed him down onto a floor cushion, facing into a corner of the living room. "No peeking — don't move an inch. Promise."

"I promise," he heard himself say.

She leaned over to run a hand down his chest from behind, brushing his ear with a breast. "And you had damn well better be naked by the time I'm back."

Her bedroom door shut and Oliver heard snatches of something Moira was singing or humming to herself come through it. Her voice wasn't all that good — whatever the song was, she made it sound droning and repetitive. He kicked off his shoes, then yanked off his jeans and the borrowed shirt and knelt back on the cushion.

In the corner in front of him was an array of shelves and small stands, each lit with thick candles. They were lined with random trinkets, brass figurines that caught the candlelight fiercely, feathers and shells knotted together with hair, and little clay saucers of dried leaves or ashes. Some of the stuff looked very old. In the center sat a wide bronze bowl on squat tripod-legs. And there was a long, curved space on the wall right above it that looked empty, but when Oliver glanced at it sidelong something shimmered there, making a shape he nearly recognized....

The bedroom door opened, but he was held by his promise and he didn't turn.

So many things these past weeks felt half-recollected, waiting on the tip of his tongue to be named and known, but this one felt desperately important, and even more eager to slip away. It was a —

Moira's song flooded over him, and the fluttering thought fought against the booze and his hard-on and the incantation of her music to make the connection. She padded up behind him and her song became words, though none that had any meaning for him. He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment, and let them open on the objects in front of him again. A —

Moira's caress across his hair became a strong palm-grip on his scalp. There was a power in that hand. He couldn't quite parse what was in her other hand or what she was doing when she raised it up and back —

Something inside his head roared out to him with recognition and alarm, and a scrap of memory bobbed up.

"Dragon's claw!" Oliver blurted.

Her chant faltered in mid-word. "What did you say?" she demanded.

"The thing hanging above your altar — that's part of a dragon, isn't it?"

Moira stood over him, candlelight flickering across her bare shoulders and breasts. The fingers of one hand were still buried in his hair.

She froze, stunned. "You can see it?" Her spell clouding his mind began to drain away.

"Yeah, now I can," he said, turning toward her. "People don't usually know when they're looking at them, do they? But I'd say that's part of the fore-talon of a magma-wyrm, as long as a scimitar and harder than diamond. It's real old, though the power's still in it... *Jesus Christ, are you trying to kill me?*"

Moira's right hand, still raised high, clutched a tarnished dagger whose wicked recurved blade reflected the little flames with a bronze light. Another second more and she would have slit his throat and held him over the bowl while he bled out.

She gave him a hard, calculating look. "No," she decided, and tossed the dagger aside. "Not now."

"But you were. This was some sort of sacrifice!"

"That was the plan," she admitted. "But you can see dragons, and that makes you a rare commodity. And possibly a useful ally. I would rather have you on my side."

**W**HATEVER OLIVER had expected to learn about himself, he would never have guessed *dragons*. He couldn't even picture one now that the potency of the rite had dissipated. Yet he could still see the talon hanging over the altar and knew with certainty what it was. He tried to overlay this discovery against what he already gathered about himself, but it shed no new light on his past. It shook free only a slim shard of a memory that the woman with hazel eyes, who had curly brown hair that the wind sometimes tugged across her cheek, could see dragons as well, and that she was very brave.

"So you fight dragons," Oliver said warily. He wasn't nearly as drunk as he had believed he was and his mind cleared rapidly.

"Well, 'fight' might be a little grandiose," Moira said. "I mainly do potions and household spells, a little bit of anything it takes to keep this community together — feel free to get dressed, by the way. The fun's over." She stepped into the bedroom. He found his jeans and while he was debating whether or not to run for his life, she emerged in the same clothes she had been wearing in the bar.

"I can give your yeast an extra bit of kick, or charm your fishnets, or whip up a draught that will bring your roving husband back," Moira continued. "No one's better at keeping moles out of gardens. But I've never even seen an adult dragon up close. I'm all Macquarie's got, though. I can repulse them a bit and I can usually keep them from setting off the quakes in the fault too close to us. And right now I'm the only reason this island is still standing."

"And you needed my blood for a ritual."

"It's not a part of the job I relish, but yes, for that particular procedure I do have to borrow extra power."

Oliver thought about the jackknife and the left-behind clothes in his closet. "I suppose Jacob told you where to find me tonight."

"Jacob knows a bit about the dragons, and he lends a hand however he can."

That was going to make returning to the apartment awkward. "Let me guess — nothing personal, right?"

"He's a decent guy and he understands the stakes," she told him. "Especially tonight. You've felt the tremors. What's swimming up toward us is a big one, and it's coming fast, and the whole fault is going to break free in a nasty way when it gets here. It may be more than I can handle. I needed the strength, and it had to be now."

She studied him again. "But you, you deal with dragons, too, don't you? You're not just another dumb civilian who looks right through them and thinks it's a weather anomaly. That place you're from, Boca Gusano, it's smack on top of the San Andreas, and it's got a problem with its own wym, worse than here."

"We did have some bad earthquakes there a few weeks ago," he said.

"And then they ended abruptly. I bet there are people defending that city. Specialists, probably. And exceptional at what they do. Were you one of them?"

"I couldn't tell you. I lost something right around that time."

"What?"

"My mind, I think."

"Oh. Damn." He couldn't tell if it was sympathy or frustration. "But that could have happened if you stood against a dragon — it's like the reality that surrounds them conflicts with the one we're equipped for. You wouldn't be the first. So I have to ask you, and I need a straight answer right away: is there anything you can do to help me drive off the one that's coming?"

Oliver searched himself for a reply. "If I were some mystic dragon-fighter, what kind of person would I be?"

"Like some big-city surgeon who does one vital thing extraordinarily well, but multiply that by a thousand — slick, powerful, and one smug son of a bitch."

"They found me in a bus station. I don't think I'll be much use to you."

"Then we may be screwed," Moira said. Her expression became grim. "But I've got an emergency backup plan. It's one-time-only, and it won't be pretty, and you can't stay here tonight."

Moira drove Oliver back into town and parked the car. Two scaled eel-shapes glared at them from the shadow of a boat trailer as they walked past.

"You see those things?" he asked.

"Yeah, I do."

"What are they?"

"Larva-swarm," Moira said. "Babies, like little wyrm-maggots. They're too weak and stupid to make it through the Earth's mantle by themselves, so they tag along when a big dragon comes up to play."

"They play...?" He thought she was being sardonic, but unbidden, a sensation came to Oliver of dancing without reserve, leaping and pirouetting at the point where the earth met the sea and the sky.

"Right," she said. "And when something is that damn big, and can shift the ground with a thought, that's a problem for everyone in the vicinity."

Moira kicked one of the creatures. It landed heavily and rolled, then hissed at her and slunk off. "So if you see a lot of these guys, it means you're about to meet their daddy."

They were everywhere. The eel-things sulked under cars, and inside Dumpsters, and behind sewage grates, heads turning to track them as they went by. One brazenly crossed the street in front of them and stopped to flash its thicket of long teeth.

Part of Oliver bridled at the threat display and without conscious intent, he locked eyes with the creature. His mind rumbled, as if there were a tremor within his own skull, or an earth-shaking growl welling up, consisting entirely of the thought, *My territory*. The wyrm-maggot in front of them leapt as if electrocuted and fled for its life, and all the others around them silently scrambled into the shadows. It left Oliver with a whanging headache.

"You'll have to teach me that one," Moira said.

"I wish I knew what it was."

She unlocked the door to her bakery.

"What I have to do takes a few hours. I'll come get you before dawn," she said, guiding him over the threshold. "I want you by my side when I face this thing."

"But I told you — "

"I don't care. This will be touch-and-go, and I'll take anything I can get to help tip the balance. If you can shake up the babies like that, maybe the big one will notice you, too. And I might need someone to distract it."

"So I'm *bait*?"

"Just get inside."

He grabbed the doorjamb and struggled, but Moira placed a palm on his forehead and smiled, and the resistance went out of him.

"Don't bother trying to escape," she commanded. "The whole shop is warded. And stay out of sight. I'll see you in the morning."

She locked him in and turned away. The shop was dark and the shelves were empty. The bell over the door jangled at him.

Oliver moved a window shade aside and watched as she crossed the street to Sorley's. The bar's door opened and Moira nearly collided with a big figure silhouetted by the hazy illumination inside as he stalked out. Her timing was perfect.

"Oh, hey, Sean," he heard, muffled by the glass.

"Hey, Moira." There was a heavy pause. "Where's your space cadet?"

"That didn't work out. You know."

"Too bad.... So, you want to come back inside and talk for a bit? I could go for another one."

"Actually, I've got a better place in mind," Moira told him. "I'm parked nearby."

Moira returned to the shop, alone, when the sky was just beginning to lighten. Her face shone in the dim entrance and the air around her hands and between her fingers vibrated with the power there. She hardly glanced at the door, but her key dove into the lock straight as a sniper's round and didn't scrape the sides as it went.

"Looks like you charged up all right," Oliver said.

"Don't you dare make light of it," Moira snapped. "He was a friend."



When we can, we'll acknowledge his gift properly. Right now, though, we've got a job to do, and the timing will be tight. Come along."

His feet obeyed her and he followed as she led him briskly across town.

"Were you able to remember anything new?" she asked.

"No, not really." Oliver looked at her hands. "But can I make a request?"

"What?"

"Touch me."

"If you say so."

Moira cupped the side of Oliver's face with her palm. The jolt went through his mind like lightning, but the flash illuminated only shadows and spaces in the shape of things that were missing. Something around the perimeter of the void briefly uncoiled, then shifted and settled again.

"Did that do anything?" she asked.

"Well, my toes are tingling," he said. "But if there's anything left in me to recover, it's still pushed down too far to find."

"What do you mean, 'pushed down'?"

"That's just how it feels to me."

But another scrap of memory had quietly drifted upwards — he saw the woman whose name began with E standing alone in clear light, her back to him as the sky came low and waves lapped at her ankles. And he was furious with her. The anger was as raw in him as if her betrayal were brand new.

Moira found a narrow path through the woods and led him out to a bare bit of high hillside on the island's edge, a flat spot before it plunged vertically into the strait. The water was gunmetal gray in the half-light and as glassy as a forest pond. Two miles away, a black and white trawler chugged across the surface toward open water. The sound reached them, faint but clear.

The sky lightened to the southeast, beyond the hills of the mainland. It revealed a rippling haze far off beyond the boat that spread across the water and grew.

"What's that there?" Oliver asked.

"Salmon," said Moira. "A shoal of salmon jumping for their lives and fleeing this way. We're cutting this a little too close for comfort."

She stepped out onto the stony knee of the hill and spread her arms. She began to speak, but it was too low for Oliver to hear and it wasn't addressed to him. Her words grew louder, a chant, then a song, then a buzzing that made the air around them thick and alive. The hillside bound itself to Oliver's feet and the grasses on the slope stopped waving — only Moira could move. Her voice rolled out over the still water without echoing back. She raised her arms high, then with a cry pounded her fists once against the rock they stood upon.

The hill shuddered. As if the island were a pebble tossed into a still puddle, a ring spread outward into the water of the strait and raced away from them. The trawler bobbed as the force passed under it, but only Moira and Oliver saw the circle of force dive up onto the mainland at the points where its circumference touched the shore several miles away.

Moira sagged. The light went out of her eyes. The new power had left her hands. Her torn knuckles oozed blood.

"And that, as they say, is that," she said. "The biggest mole barrier in the world is now in place around our garden, encircling Macquarie miles out. A dragon won't cross that line for love or money. It'll be taking its business elsewhere." She sighed and gave Oliver an apologetic smile. "Thanks for keeping me company."

But midway between the trawler and where they stood, the surface of the water grew speckled and hazy. The leaping salmon bolted toward the island. Then the school was cut into a dozen segments by much larger breaching shapes — a pod of orcas that had been hunting the salmon along the coast now sought to overtake and pass through them in their panic. Moira stared.

"We were too late," Oliver said. "It's in here with us. Take it down!"

Moira stepped to the cliff-edge. She raised her arms and began to speak, though there was no strength in her voice. Her shout was thin against the rising wind.

The water in the middle of the strait turned white and frothed. Up from the center of the foam exploded a scaled, red wolf's head, as big as the hill they stood upon, mustachioed with tendrils and grinning around a forest of jutting teeth. It corkscrewed into the sky, a fluid, wingless, serpentine body that soared upward for half a mile, until at last the paddle-shaped tip of the tail left the water. It hung there, spinning, the ruby eyes

partly closed in delight, and then looped over onto itself and dove back into the strait. Splintered planks and flotsam that had been the trawler bobbed to the surface.

There was a brief second of silence, then the dragon burst back into the air, equally at home swimming through stone, water, or sky. As it soared, the rising sun cleared the horizon and the dragon's great scales glistened and shone. It rippled like a banner as it stretched itself out over the strait, then plunged under again, a perfect glittering rainbow arc. The air in its trail turned solid and rained down onto the water in a bombardment of hailstones and sapphires and seashells. Fleeing gulls became meteorites and whistled straight upward into space.

"Oh, holy mother," Moira said. "I had no idea. How am I supposed to —"

Macquarie jumped and rocked as the wyrm wriggled through the roots of the island. The crag they stood on wrenched and cracked. Oliver froze, but Moira dragged him back as the rock broke free and slumped down into the water. Soft earth resonated with the vibrations and liquefied and flowed downhill around them, carrying trees and boulders.

The dragon sprang up full-length into the sky and chased itself in whorls and Möbius bands, and fell tumbling and recovered, and spun to let the sunshine sweep across its entire body — it was dancing with joy. It swelled with the taste of air and release from the unyielding weight of a planet poised on top of it. Peals of thunder that swept across the hillside were its pure, elemental laughter.

The sound shook Oliver's gut and the sensation called forth a familiar dread, and patterns that went with it. He knew the novelty would wear off and then the dragon's play would turn into long, sine-wave dives, running through deep earth, water, and sky, like a needle pulling thread. It would follow the path of least resistance, slipping down along the line where the tectonic plates collided. In its wake any tension stored in the fault would be sprung free and the surface of the Earth would snap back and ring like a bell, tossing, crushing, or burying everything that stood upon it.

Moira improvised.

"Hey, you!" she shouted. "You! Heed me!" She was absurdly small at the edge of the hillside, sandwiched between the sky and the strait.

The dragon froze in its dance and snorted like a puppy discovering a

new plaything. It bent low and thrust its head over the waves toward them. They stood in shadow as the muzzle hovered overhead. The great tongue lolled from the forest of its teeth and the jewel-bright snout shone as it worked to catch their scent.

"Shame on you, you thoughtless bastard!" Drawing strength from the bones of the island, Moira was a hard, bright spot in the gloom. "There are people here! You're killing them!"

The dragon cocked its head. It laid its chin flat on the cliff-top and wriggled its soaring crimson body in a show of abasement. Moira took hold of one of the tendrils that bearded its jawline and yanked.

"Go back to your holes and your heat and your darkness! You have no place up in the sunlight!"

The great eyes went wide. But now Oliver knew this was a creature to whom three or even four dimensions seemed pathetically few, which could curl up and hide behind a quark if it chose to, or engulf a mountain, or exist only as a thought. And it was far too proud to be chastised by some gnat enslaved by its own body.

"HAA!" The dragon expelled its breath in a great scoffing blast that sent Moira tumbling back into the trees.

It grinned down at Oliver, offering him a share in the joke, but he could do nothing more than stare back. Disappointed, the dragon reared up to crush him. The hillside was an anvil and the little soul he had scraped together was about to be shattered against it.

But Oliver had been here before, back when he was another person, and he had known he would be here again. And before that person had disappeared, he had left behind a certain trigger deep in his mind, to ensure that his response would always be the same.

Reflexively, Oliver's mouth dropped open, wide, until his jaw threatened to pop loose. What flew out of him took form the moment it touched the air and was impossibly large, though it had been contained wrapped around the neurons within the space of his skull. It stretched up into the air, a skyscraper, a mushroom cloud, a salute to the sun that the sun itself would have to acknowledge — and then the last bit of the dragon he had kept trapped inside him flew free, roaring with exultation and rage. The air glinted with diamond dust and its voice was a symphony of earthquakes.

The immeasurable pressure that alien presence had exerted on his mind had forced Oliver deeper and deeper, down into the dark places where he could not find himself. But now that dragon spiraled into the sky and Oliver was freed as well, and he rose back up and returned. He recalled who he was, and the nature of his strength. He remembered his home and the pride of defending it. And he was filled again with the wordless loss and rage for Elspeth, the woman who loved him, who stood against the Boca Gusano dragon alone, and miscalculated, and was destroyed. He would never have needed to capture it this way if she had not betrayed him with that misstep. He breathed deep and smiled grimly. He knew his business, and his business was dragons.

The Boca Gusano wyrm was ancient, even by the geological standards of the Earth, and it had dominated the San Andreas Fault for eons. Its golden body cast a shadow over the sky and dwarfed the Macquarie dragon, which snarled and fell back.

Oliver thrummed with energy; he was aware of every cell within him and every molecule of air touching his skin. He did not take his eyes from the shapes crossing the sky, but he knew that Moira had hobbled to his side.

"You should really see them in Southern California some time," he said conversationally, as if the figures above them were floating at the end of kite strings. "The light is so clear over the ocean you can pick out the detail of every muscle and scale two miles away. Just magnificent! Everything is so muted here."

"What have you done?" she demanded. "Now every last one of us is dead."

The arrogance of a man who had single-handedly saved cities flashed in his eyes, but then he shook his head gently and touched her arm. "Hardly. This was the plan all along. Watch."

The golden dragon that filled the sky above them turned to dart west over the Pacific, but with a sharp two-fingered gesture Oliver brought its head back in line with the strait. He stepped to the edge of the ruined cliff, and raised an arm and dropped it with an axe-chop. The Boca Gusano dragon rolled and plummeted like a falcon. It struck the Macquarie dragon before it could flee, catching its neck in its jaws. Oliver's dragon looped coil after coil around its body, until it was hidden from their view inside a roiling jeweled knot as broad as a thunderstorm.

Oliver's outstretched hand clenched into a fist and the knot above them tightened, then strained, and when the golden dragon straightened and swooped upward again, it was the only object left in the sky. It roared in triumph while a slick spot of air shimmered and faded.

The Boca Gusano dragon circled the island, its swirling body so long that its head followed close behind its own tail. Oliver relaxed and permitted it to revel in its victory. He turned to Moira and smiled sadly.

The dragon cast a crafty glance down toward Oliver, then dove for the earth and escape.

"Remember what you have seen here today," Oliver told Moira. "You'll have to be prepared to describe it all."

"Who would I ever talk about this with?" she asked. "Who would even believe me?"

"It will be obvious soon," he said. "And when you do it, remember that of everything that has happened so far, this is the tricky part."

As his dragon plunged, Oliver raised his arms and spread his fingers. It turned and twisted, but its path curved against its own will as if the sky itself warped and shifted around it, so that the massive body fell straight down onto them. Oliver's mouth dropped open, painfully wide but not impossibly so, and then the dragon was gone, with the tip of a tail-flick before their faces.

The impact drove Oliver five yards backwards, sprawled on the rocky ground.

Much later, he realized that he was curled up on a hard hillside, and that he was a person, and that he was sobbing but he didn't know why. A woman cradled his head in her lap.

"Do you know who you are?" she asked.

He probed his memory, but it was all too far down for him to reach. He shook his head.

"No matter," she said. "Everything's fine now. Your name is Oliver. I'll help you get yourself sorted. And when you're ready, I'll tell you why you're a hero."

