

Darren Boyd could smell the sea before he saw it, a faint hint of salt air and seaweed that slipped in through the lowered window of the van. That was when he knew he was lost.

Sighing heavily, he pulled the Mercedes Sprinter over into the layby, pulled on the handbrake and stared balefully at the SatNav mounted on the windscreen.

Bloody thing. The direction arrow was pointing well away from the destination, had been for the last twenty minutes. He'd keyed the correct postcode in, he was sure of it. Should have taken him right into the centre of Dorchester. Instead, it had led him a merry dance along the A354 before ordering him off and dropping him into a series of identical country lanes that couldn't possibly appear on any map. He'd tried to follow the setting sun, knowing that west would be roughly the right direction, but each of the lanes twisted and turned back on themselves so much that he just didn't know where he was.

And after all this faffing about, he'd been heading south.

Have to do it the old fashioned way, he told himself, and reached for the battered AA Road Atlas rolled up and unused in the door pocket. How the other drivers would laugh when he got back. Old school, the type who refused to use the SatNavs fitted in their vehicles. *Map, memory and tongue in yer head, that's all yer need Boydie*, one of the older, more awkward ones had said to him when he'd asked them for directions to the new drop this morning. *Postcode? Nah, dunno. Never bother with it. Take the 354 past Blandford Forum, drop down, do a right...*and Darren Boyd would be lost already.

Staring at the blue, green and red snaketrails on the printed page, he grudgingly admitted that the old fuckers had a point. Like so many of his generation, Darren Boyd relied totally on SatNav for directions. He'd lied at the interview for the driver's job – shit, who didn't? – said he knew the South Coast inside out, yeah, can read maps no problem, no, I never get lost, boss, you can trust me...

And here he was. His second day on the job and he'd fucked up again. Yesterday he'd only had five drops to do, three in Bournemouth and two in Winchester on the way back to the firm's depot in Didcot. Seven thirty start and he'd got back at eight in the evening. All the other drivers – on London, Home Counties and East Anglia calls – had come back, debriefed and had gone home by five. The Transport Supervisor had wanted an early finish and hadn't been too impressed at being kept waiting. Darren had blamed traffic, awkward customers, SatNav playing up but it didn't wash. So now the name on his folder at the office had been crossed off and replaced with Turbo.

Ironic, really. That was what he'd been known as in his Boy Racer days. Even now there were times Kelly still called him that. She kept an embarrassing picture of him in her purse, one taken just after they'd first met, one he looked really chavvy in. Fake Burberry baseball cap, pulled low over the ears to hide the receding hairline, hair which he kept cropped to a grade 2 anyway – bloody unfair to start going bald at only twenty four. Single gold earring which he'd to take out every night to stop his earlobe turning green – bloody Elizabeth Duke rubbish, but Kelly had bought it for him for his eighteenth birthday and any gift from her was to be treasured.

Just like the gold pendant she had bought him for his birthday last week. He unconsciously fingered it as he stared at the mapbook. A small, half inch sculpture of some strange squid-like creature, all tentacles and bulging eyes. At least this one didn't turn his skin green. It was obviously some real quality piece, but she wouldn't tell him where she got it from.

The baseball cap and the Burberry had gone, as had the blue Vauxhall Corsa, which he'd pimped up with a Halfords exhaust and fibreglass add-ons. An induction kit had made it sound throaty and sporty to him once upon a time, but when you realise the car sounds like one of your old man's hedge trimmers you know its time to grow up.

Getting too old for revving the engine up in McDonalds' car parks and trying to beat Beamers and Mercs at traffic lights though, and he knew it. Kelly was secretly relieved that he'd outgrown the boy racer phase but was disappointed when he chopped in the Corsa for a Renault Megane.

*Better be careful, Daz, she'd told him. You're getting old. Before long you'll be as sad and wrinkled as the other drivers at Ocean Wave Direct.*

Yeah, fat chance, he told himself. May be getting on but I ain't fuckin' dead.

Just fuckin' lost. He stared at the map again, then threw it away in disgust.

He jerked open the driver's door, stomped out and slammed it irritably. He noticed with satisfaction that the suction pad of the SatNav had worked its way loose and, with the slamming of the door, fell off the windscreen, taking the machine with it.

He took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh air. A light breeze ruffled the grass on the verge of the layby, bringing with it the scent of the sea. It was even more potent than the faint hint of salt air that he'd noticed earlier, not so much an aroma as a summons.

It brought back memories of summer holidays on the beach, chips and hot dogs, running barefoot on cold sand and tripping in tangles of seaweed, gasping and laughing delightedly at the shockingly cold temperature of the water as he jumped headlong into it...

He jerked himself out of his reverie. Daydreaming wasn't going to get him to his destination. Strange, though, how just a smell of seaside air had taken him back to his childhood. If he closed his eyes he could see himself on the beach at Sandown at eight years old, hunting in rock pools for crabs and razor clams.

He could hear it now, as well. The sound of the sea, gentle crashing of distant breakers against the rocky base of the headland. Coming from the direction the van was facing. He wondered whether or not to continue. It was obviously the wrong way, but at least he might find a village or town down there, someone to ask directions back to the main road.

He checked the mobile, surprised that the Transport Supervisor hadn't been on to him yet, leaving a snotty message. A closer inspection of the Nokia's screen told him why.

No signal. Probably explained why the SatNav was cocked up as well. Small mercies, at least he had an excuse not to get in touch. He replaced the phone, kicked the SatNav out of the footwell, and began to drive off.

He looked at the folder on the passenger seat, stuffed with delivery notes and invoices for the consignments of chilled fish in the back of his van. He sighed, wondered how long he was going to last at this job. It wasn't the timescales or the customer service he had a problem with. He got on with people, just didn't like tugging the forelock or calling them sir, madam. Neither did he like the sales patter he had to give.

Not just delivering fish but promoting and selling it. When they'd put him through the roleplay scenario he'd almost pissed himself laughing.

The manager played the prospective customer. Darren had to knock on an imaginary door, wait for it to open, and then say the magic words:

*Hello! I'm Darren – a fishman with a difference!* And then he'd hand over a business card – a business card for a van driver, for fuck's sake – with his name and the “fishman with a difference” slogan underneath. And then he'd reel off a list of the varieties of fish in the chilled interior of the van, the special prices and discounts he could offer. He'd just stared dumbfounded at the manager as he was prompted to say these magic words, wondering what sort of mug's game he'd signed up to. He'd almost said “Shove it, yeah?” but stopped himself in time. After being booted out of the previous job, and with Kelly two months pregnant, now was not the time to jeopardise any employment prospects. Money was okay, there was some sort of bonus scheme for the best performing fish sales – not one for him, he'd decided with a wry smile – discounted fish products and they didn't mind if you took the van home. Could've been worse.

After a few minutes of driving, the road bent sharply to the left and the trees fell away, revealing the sea. He was closer to it than he'd first realised.

The road he was on skirted the headland, a coastal road that narrowed, and then dipped sharply forcing him to slow down. Not enough room for two vehicles to pass without smearing each other up, so he took it slowly. *No point rushing anyway, Turbo*, he told himself, grinning. *Might as well relax and enjoy the view.*

The sea was a calm, glassy blue with a few distant, creamy whitecaps. The late afternoon sun was turning the sky from a golden hue to a fiery red. Some of the distant breakers caught this light and turned a dark pink. Almost like blood coughed up from dying lungs, Darren realised and shivered at the morbid thought. *Where did that come from?*

The road bent round a little more, and then Darren Boyd saw it. A tiny little village with four or five small fishing boats clustered in the small bay that formed a natural harbour. Stone cottages formed a retreating wall, and from the elevated ground he was on Darren could see small roads, almost lanes, branching off in various directions, leading to a churchyard, a small collection of shops and some other stone buildings that formed a small circle around what looked like a village green.

The coastal track widened when it joined the village, finally widening to become a real road again and Darren Boyd breathed a sigh of relief. He brought the vehicle to a halt, studied his surroundings. Nothing remarkable. In fact, on closer inspection those boats looked like they didn't get much use, were in a poor state of repair. Fishing was obviously not this village's main industry.

Darren had a quick scan of the Road Atlas again, tried to get his bearings. No, still none the wiser. The SatNav wasn't telling him much either, it's arrow still pointing downwards, the voice ordering him to turn around.

*Turn around...* for a moment it sounded more like Kelly's voice than the posh, judgemental bint on the SatNav. A warning from a loved one, to get the hell out of here.

*Don't be so fuckin' stupid*, he told himself, putting the van into gear and popping the handbrake. *'S only a bloody village*. A small one, though, and one that obviously didn't have much going on for it – didn't even have a direction sign.

He drove along the harbour road, searching for something – or someone. *God, please let there be someone around. Hopefully a postie or delivery bloke, someone who knows the area and can point me in the right direction.*

The harbour area itself was dead. There was nothing to indicate a thriving – or even a struggling – fishing industry. Certainly no sign of any market. The only thing that came close was a one story building finished in an Italianate style with creamy Portland stone that would have been a handsome building at one time. Now the window panes were cracked and broken, the doors barred and shuttered. An overhanging sign, peeled and faded, declared this to be the Olde Fishmarket - Custom House Quay. Local fresh and frozen fish and all types of shellfish were promised.

A promise made a long time ago, Darren figured. This building hadn't been used for years. So, no fishing industry, but that didn't account for the

total lack of life. After all, being in such a prime position on the South Coast meant there were other opportunities for a small village to make its livelihood.

There could've been a few small pleasure boats, one of those outfits that promised to take you out on a trip around the coast. At this time of year – and in this sort of location – there would've been some trade for that at least. But nothing. It was almost as though the village had been abandoned, left for dead.

Darren shivered at the thought. *Getting' morbid again.* He fished into his tracksuit bottoms for a packet of Mayfairs. Lighting one, he scowled at the deserted harbour and looked across the bay to the sea beyond. A few gulls cried mournfully as they swept past him, as if bemoaning the lack of food.

In spite of the warmth he shivered. Scanning the windows in the stone cottages around the harbour, he could see that not one of them had their windows open. A lot had the curtains drawn, and he had to peer hard at one on the far right side. It might have been a trick of the light – the reflected sunshine was particularly bright on the water there – but he could have sworn he saw one of the heavy dark curtains twitching.

He sucked harder on the cigarette. Well, that was bloody odd. A hot day like this and everyone inside, curtains drawn and windows shut? Probably retirement cottages. Some old timers he knew really felt the cold, even on hot summer days like this one and insisted on keeping doors and windows shut.

He decided to travel further into the village itself, see if he could find some signs of life there.

And perhaps find out what this bloody place was called. Behind him the harbour cottages stood cold, lifeless and uninterested. But as Darren swung



the Mercedes round and headed away from the harbour he stared intently at the stone cottage with the twitching curtains. Something long, thin and green brushed against the glass. Probably the branch of some houseplant, moved around by whoever was shuffling inside, he figured.

Less than a hundred metres further down the road ended. To the left, a ramp that sank down into the uninviting sea. To the right, the ramp crept upwards to a leafy thoroughfare that terminating in the village green. Here at least there were some signs of life.

A two-storied building with a thatched roof, whitewashed stone walls, obviously the village pub judging by the sign hanging over the door. A faded painting of a seascape with a setting sun. The name below it proclaimed the building to be *The Day Gone Down*.

Darren manoeuvred the Sprinter into one of the parking bays. He saw shuttered windows open, obviously to let out the heat of the day. Shutting down the engine, he could hear the clicking of pool balls and electronic sound effects from a fruit machine. Voices.

He pushed the door open, only just remembering to throw his cigarette down and stamp it lifeless before he went in.

Not surprisingly for a coastal pub, the décor had a nautical theme, but one that had been done with little care or attention. Fishing nets covered the dark wooden panelled walls, plastic lobsters and crabs stuck half heartedly on them. On the uncovered walls there were cheap framed prints of fishing boats and sailing vessels. The fruit machine invited him to *Raid Treasure Island, me hearties!* playing, unbelievably the theme tune to *Captain Pugwash*.

To his right Darren could see a pair of dining tables with chairs upholstered in a red plush material. Salt and pepper cellars in the shape of lighthouses and a small printed menu held upright in a plastic frame invited any potential diners to sample NEPTUNE'S DELIGHTS.

All that was missing was a CD of sea shanties. The bar looked a bit more normal. But not welcoming.

A tall, bearded man in his early fifties stood behind the bar, thin hairy arms folded rigidly over his chest. Unsmiling and hostile. Just above him, mounted above the optics, was a glass case containing something metallic, golden. Four men were on stools at the bar, their heads bowed over the pints on the bartop as though in supplication. Four heads slowly turned to face him.

*Oh fuck, I'm in Deliverance country.* Curious faces slowly turning hostile, eyes narrowing as they took in the sight of this intruder.

Three were in their late thirties to early forties, dressed in faded, torn work trousers and matching T shirts. An aroma of stale sweat hung in the air along with the unmistakable odour of rotting fish. Darren wrinkled his nose and wondered how the "fishman with a difference" spiel would go down here.

*Hi! I'm Darren – fishman with a difference! The difference is that I don't stink like a rotting turbot.* No, they wouldn't be amused.

"Scuse me, chaps," he began, " trying to find me way back to Dorchester."

"Dorchester?" The drinker on the far right side of the bar smirked. He was older than the others, fifties probably, with matted grey hair, a three day growth of stubble and a lopsided smile that came across as a sneer. He gave Darren a long, appraising look with watery grey eyes as he took a long swig of

his beer. “Yer a long ways from Dorchester, young ‘un. TwatNav packed up, ‘as it?”

“Yeah. What’s the best way of getting back there?”

The old man stroked his chin thoughtfully. The rasping sound of scratching stubble filled the silence of the bar.

“What you looking for in Dorchester?”

*Fuck me, a third degree.* “Just gotta deliver some fish to a hotel.”

“Fish?” His eyes widened. The other drinkers were looking at him with unveiled interest. “Where you from, son?”

“Didcot. Oxfordshire.”

“Oxfordshire? *Oxfordshire?* What the bloody ‘ell you doin’ here? Dorset can supply it’s own bloody fish! We don’t need you foreigners bringing yer out of town crap down here!” The old man jumped off his bar stool and advanced towards Darren, waving his dimpled pint glass threateningly. “I know where you be from,” he hissed. “Ocean Wave Direct. No-one tell you they used to run outa here? They used to get all the fish from our coast. Now where do they gets it, eh? Not here, ‘s all imported crap delivered to bloody Oxford.”

Darren took a step back. Even though the old man was a full foot shorter than him, and was so thin a good fart would probably have knocked him down, he was shocked by the sheer fury in the old man eyes. The alcoholic slur had gone and there was an energy and vitality that only pure rage and hatred can impart. And that glass mug would definitely *hurt...*

Darren raised placating hands as he moved back towards the open door. “Hey, calm down, pops. I just work for them.”

“Fuckers like you destroyed our livelihood! That’s why Fairlight is dyin’!” The old man was crying as he raged, tears streaming down his reddened cheeks. “We won awards for our fish! We had the world record for individual catches, and now...now...” His shoulders slumped, the glass weapon at the old boy’s knees. Darren glanced at the other drinkers in the bar, an unspoken plea for help. *C’mon boys, calm your mate down, yeah?*

In a normal pub, the regulars would be going up and calming the old boy down, making excuses for him as they placated him. *Sorry pal, he’s not normally like this, or: he’s only like this when he’s had a few...but not here.*

The other three men were rooted to their stools, motionless. One of them nodding in silent agreement, the other two watching Darren with narrowed eyes and slightly parted lips, as if they were expecting (hoping for?) a physical confrontation.

*No chance, boys. I ain’t playing that game.* Darren was at the door now. Perhaps it was time to go, he wasn’t going to get any help here. At least he knew the name of the village. Fairlight. Should be easy enough to find on the map, and he could work his way back from -

“Jesus!”

The pint mug had missed him by a fraction as it shot from the old boy’s grip. Darren was convinced that it had been aimed at his head and that he’d had a lucky escape until he heard the smashing of glass, and the thick crack of a windscreen breaking. Now he knew what the old boy’s target had been.

“Ocean Wave Direct be you? Let’s see the Ocean Wave... *Direct... you to Dorchester with no windscreen.*”

Darren turned and stared at the damage as the old man cackled at his play on words on the van's logo. "For. Fuck's. *Sake*." He turned back, only to find that the old man had vanished, run back inside with a speed that belied his age and inebriation.

"Yeah, you better fuckin' run, you mental old cunt!" Darren shouted into the pub doorway. "Before the Old Bill get ya...." His words trailed off at the sight of the man in the doorway.

Behind the bar he had seemed tall, imposing. Out of it he seemed even taller.

The man had to stoop to clear his head from the eaves of the doorway. A sympathetic smile was on his bearded face as he walked towards Darren and the Sprinter.

"Oh dear. I see Tom's gone off on one again."

"Again?" Darren snapped. "So he's normally like this?"

The tall man nodded. "Ever since his employers closed down the distribution depot and made him redundant." He nodded towards the livery on the van. "I'm afraid your visit has brought back unwanted memories. It was Ocean Wave Direct that employed him...and indeed, the majority of Fairlight's workforce." He sighed. "The company offered them relocation packages to Didcot, not very generous, and very few took them. Family commitments, you see."

Darren lit a cigarette with shaking hands. The nicotine relaxed him slightly. "Don't know too much about that, chap. I've only been with the firm two days." Although now he remembered the disused warehouse on the harbour front.

The tall man smiled. “I’m sorry, I’m forgetting my manners. My name’s Ben Marsh.” He extended a hand. Darren shook it, frowned at the cold, dampness of the man’s palm. There was no strength there, either. It felt like shaking hands with a dead fish. Nothing dead about the eyes, though. They were a cold, bright blue that regarded him with a disconcerting intensity. Darren blinked.

“You the landlord, then?”

Marsh smiled. “Not exactly. Harry Soames is the proprietor, but he’s been a bit under the weather recently. I help out when I can, and with the decline in numbers within the parish of Fairlight, there’s not much in the church to occupy me. I like to help my shoal as much as I can.”

Darren frowned. “Don’t you mean flock?”

“Sorry?”

“You said shoal. You’re the priest, and I thought priests had flocks. Shoals are...well, lots of fish.”

Marsh threw back his head and laughed. “Forgive me. We’ve been part of a seafaring community for so long that I forget outsiders aren’t used to our terminology. Come inside for a drink, young man.”

*Shoal. Could be really funny and say there’s something fishy about this.* “Nah, thanks. I gotta phone the guv’nor, let him know what’s happened. And then the Old Bill.”

Marsh looked at the windscreen and stroked his chin. “Of course, of course. I’ll phone the police from the bar. I’m sure Tom will have departed by now, so it’s quite safe for you to come in.”

Less than two minutes later, Darren was sitting at the bar, sipping a half pint of Fosters, the handset of the pub's payphone pressed to his ear. No signal on the mobile.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Look, all I can say is that the Plod are on their way now. This Tom bloke's a regular troublemaker, he's known for it. Weren't pleased to see me at all, help me responsible... No, I'm not going to make it tonight! Phone the hotel, tell them they'll have it tomorrow! Just get Autoglass down here pronto, yeah?” He slammed the phone down and drained the rest of the lager. “Wanker.”

Marsh took the drained glass and without being asked refilled it. “Awkward boss?”

“Not awkward, just clueless. ‘Oh, can't you drive back with the screen as it is?’ More concerned with the deliveries getting done than my bleedin' safety.”

Marsh placed the refill on the beer mat. Darren eyed it, tempted but wary. The beer was flat and stale, the Day Gone Down needed its pumps cleaning out, but at least it was cold. And free.

“On the house. You might as well stay the night, Autoglass won't be here for another few hours and then you have to wait at least an hour for the adhesive to set before driving anywhere...”

It was tempting. Fuck it, why not? He took a deep draught of the lager. Closer to the bar now, he had a better view of the golden object in the glass case. And the photo next to it.

The photo had caught his attention first because he recognised the building. A school trip to London, years ago, to the Tower Hill Memorial.

Commemorating the seafarers who had lost their lives during both World Wars... GAVE THEIR LIVES FOR THEIR COUNTRY AND HAVE NO GRAVE BUT THE SEA.

No grave but the sea... that simple statement had chilled him as a child, bringing an image of a cold, lifeless grey sea that was nothing but a giant cemetery. He'd woken one night after a horrific nightmare, a dream where he had witnessed thousands of gravestones break through the seething foam of the sea, burial markers held aloft by the skeletal arms of drowned mariners. And now, seeing it again had the same chilling effect on him. The July heat no longer warmed him. He took another draught of the lager, grimacing. *Christ, what's wrong with this guy's pumps?*

He turned to the golden object instead. Strange partnership, a photographic memorial to deceased sailors and a golden icon.

It was about nine inches high, standing upright on a wooden plinth and shielded by a Perspex case. It looked like two hands joined together at the thumbs, palms facing outwards, fingers splayed...

No, wait a minute...he peered closer. It looked more like squid, or octopus. The fingers of the hands were actually tentacles. Not like any octopus he'd ever seen, though – or wanted to see, come to think of it. An octopus shouldn't have teeth, and certainly not teeth bared in a hideous, razor sharp grin like that. A pair of fine cut rubies created a sinister pair of eyes, the polished facets catching the dim light from the bar and enhancing it, giving the eyes the appearance of burning like coal embers.

“Ben. Just what *is* that?”



Ben Marsh glanced at the golden object in the case. “That came from one of the previous Marshes. About two hundred years ago, a little souvenir from one of his expeditions from the South Seas. Strange thing, came from the elder of the tribe. Seems he gave it to my ancestor quite freely.”

“Why? Did it have some sort of voodoo curse on it?”

“Far from it,” Marsh stroked the case of the golden structure almost reverently. “When he returned and founded the church of Fairlight the villagers believed God Himself had blessed them. Fairlight, like so many coastal communities, relied heavily on the sea for its survival and had always done well for itself. However, my ancestor’s foundation coincided with an influx of fish the like of which no one had seen before. The catches trebled in size overnight, and not just the normal species. Certain fish that only came from the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean – the villagers of Fairlight were eating Hoki and Pacific salmon long before the rest of Europe were in a position to import them from source.”

Darren thought about the fish in his van. Creatures that had been born and bred thousands of miles away in distant lands, now delivered daily to British consumers who didn’t give their origins a second thought, just took it all for granted – demanded it. And Marsh was telling him that this village had access to exotic fish centuries before the invention of freezing, canning and mass transportation...no way.

“You pulling my chain, chap? If any of this was possible, surely Fairlight would’ve been world famous.”

Marsh turned from the gold object and stared hard at Darren. “I can assure you, my friend, I’m telling the truth. Fairlight was beginning to make a

name for itself. Other counties heard miraculous tales of exotic fish and shellfish landed daily at Fairlight's harbour, wondered why none of this natural bounty was making its way inland. Truth to tell, the villagers didn't want outsiders getting involved. They'd ask too many awkward questions.

"They'd find out the price Fairlight had to pay for its bounty."

"A price, yeah? What sorta price?"

Marsh shrugged his shoulders and smiled sheepishly. "No-one really knows. There were tales, of course, superstitious whisperings from jealous outsiders. Sacrifices and human offerings, that sort of nonsense. A village that prospered was also remarkably conservative about its success, never boasted. You could call it modesty."

"More like it was ashamed. One thing I do know, Ben, is that everything has a price. You should see what my firm charges for Pacific salmon, and that's in the twenty first century. To get it for free, two hundred years ago – and on a regular basis – well, must've been a hell of a price to pay."

"Must've been, indeed. All we do know is that the village went into decline in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and no exotic fish were landed at Fairlight. In fact, at the start of the twentieth century even domestic fish was hard to come by. The village declined, people began to move elsewhere. If you believed the myths, it was because no offering was made to whatever deity Fairlight was supposed to have been following. The village's nautical tradition remained proud, though. We supplied many mariners who laid down their lives in both wars – hence the photo of the memorial you see here. At least thirty of the names on that memorial came from Fairlight.

“And since then, Fairlight has been in terminal decline. People like Tom like to think they remember the old times when times were good and fish plentiful, but it’s never been that way. When your firm set up here a few years back, there was a brief resurgence in the town’s prosperity because Ocean Wave Direct went further out to sea and was happy to recruit as many men as it could find. For a long time, Fairlight only existed because of Ocean Wave Direct.

“But of course, it could never last. The company moving away was the final blow to the village. There are some, though, who believe Fairlight can recover its greatness.”

Darren shrugged. His shoulders felt heavier. Perhaps it was the heat of the day, finally taking its toll on his body. Perhaps it was the two pints of rancid Fosters he’d drunk too quickly.

“After Ocean Wave Direct...*abandoned* the village, and it’s sense of corporate responsibility, the locals took steps. One of these steps was to understand the past. To learn from it, to accept it...and where necessary, to repeat it.” Marsh never took his eyes off Darren, never blinked. In addition to the heat-induced lethargy, Darren started to feel nervous. Felt like eyes were watching him. He cast a quick glance at the golden object – an icon, an object of faith – stared at the rubies of its eyes, felt them burning into him. He felt a tugging under his polo shirt, the gold chain tightening at the back of his neck. The pendant pulling down on his chest, a sudden heavy weight that had him falling to his knees.

“Where necessary, to pay the price our forefathers paid. Which is why they looked to the descendants of the Marsh family, the only people who

understood what Fairlight was built on, how it could survive. This is why I was called. Who better than a priest to understand the nature of sacrifice, of appeasing a god?

“No, Darren, it’s not me pulling your chain. But Our Father is...”

Darren hit the floor, his head spinning. Drugged, he realised. *The fucker’s slipped me a Mickey Finn!* Rohypnol, probably explained the weird taste of the lager. A sense of panic lurked in the back of his mind, unable to fight the waves of tiredness that were crashing on the beach of his body.

He’d read somewhere that date rape drugs usually wear off after four to eight hours – and that victims sometimes wouldn’t remember what happened to them during that time.

Upon waking in a confined space with the smell of pinewood in his nostrils and complete darkness around him his imagination went into overdrive. His movements were restricted; at first he thought he’d been tied up. Then, as his fingers traced the grain of the wood and the toes of his trainers kicked against a solid barrier he suspected.

He was lying flat, his back was on something hard. If he tried to sit upright his forehead made contact with the wood. He was in a wooden box of some kind...

*- a coffin, Jesus Christ Almighty a coffin!*

No, not a coffin. Couldn’t be. A crate, maybe, transporting him somewhere. He forced himself to calm down. Take deep breaths. Slow down. *Think calmly and rationally. You’re not in a coffin, they obviously want you alive...*

That thought didn't help. But as long as he could tell himself that he was in a wooden box, a crate maybe, not a coffin, he could -

Movement. The box he was in was lifting, being raised. He felt the bottom end move first, then the top end until he was level again. It wobbled, as though supported on uneven shoulders.

*Pallbearers!* His mind shrieked.

*For fuck sake, get a grip! Pallbearers are for the dead.* He was being taken somewhere, in secret, which was obvious. He was wanted alive.

He could hear his own breathing, rapid and shallow but thunderous in the tiny, enclosed space. The air was becoming thick and stale, he could smell his own sour breath bounced back on the pinewood of the coffin – no, *crate*, not coffin - he told himself. The darkness refused to lighten; he opened his eyes and squeezed them shut, opened, shut...he didn't know if they were open or closed anymore, the dark was that intense.

Stinging in his eyes told him that his eyes were open, panic-induced sweat from his forehead. He moaned softly. Sweat trickled down his forehead, soaked his chest and armpits. The sweat of an airless, confined space, and the sweat of fear.

He was dimly aware that his pendant was missing.

The sensation of moving forward, of being *carried*, continued. Over rough, uneven ground, he could hear the scraping of shoe leather against shale – or shingle.

As if in answer to his moans he heard voices, a muted singing. Strange, alien words sung in an unearthly melody.

*...lä! lä! Cthulhu Fhtagn...R'hle! To Y'ha-nthlei go...*

Male and female voices. He suddenly remembered that he hadn't seen any women in the village. He could hear them now, though, their voices singing as lustily and vibrantly as the men.

The movement – and the singing – ceased. The wooden container he was in was lowered, slowly, gently, until it was flush with the...ground, he supposed.

He could smell the sea again. Just as rich and evocative as he had this morning when his journey had ended at Fairlight. The salt tang of the sea air, a hint of diesel from the marine pumps on the harbour, the scent of dead and decaying fish...

The scent became a stench, a rancid odour that permeated the wood of his vessel, had him gagging and retching in disgust.

This wasn't just gone off fish, this was something else. Nothing in this planet's oceans could smell as bad as that, could it? He began to vomit, tried to turn over to stop himself choking on it. Impossible in the cramped confines of the container. Twisting his head, he managed to stop the spew slipping back down his throat. It trickled down his chin, formed a thick puddle in the space between his ear and the base of the container. He kicked out with his feet, moaning in misery and despair at this fresh suffering.

And then he knew where the stench was coming from. He could feel its source in the box with him. His kicking had disturbed it.

Everything else was forgotten as the thing began to move. His panic at the thought of being buried alive, the dizziness and nausea of the drug's after-

effects, the stench of his own vomit that was his only pillow. Just one single over-riding emotion. Fear.

He couldn't see it, couldn't hear it, but he could smell it – and feel it. It was making its way upward, using whatever it had in place of hands to clamber up his body.

Cold, wet, snakelike appendages caressed his thighs. He shrieked in horror as he felt them crawling, feeling upwards to the crotch of his tracksuit bottoms. There was something sharp at the end of each of these appendages, something that made a clicking sound as it brushed the metal zipper of his trousers. He froze. He fought the temptation to push the thing away because he didn't want to know what the thing felt like in his hands – and there was nowhere to push the thing away to.

The appendages moved upwards, pulling at the thin cotton of his polo shirt as the thing heaved its bulk. A cold, damp shapeless mass that soaked his trousers in whatever God-awful slime it had wallowed in before it was put in the box with him. A weight that pressed down on his stomach – then his chest – as it came closer to his face. The appendages with their sharp attachments – *claws, talons*, his mind told him – fluttered on his cheeks, stroked his nose.

And all the time, the rancid stench of decaying sea life filled his nostrils and the back of his throat, a foul miasma of marine decay, an almost physical presence that was just as nauseating as the unseen creature making its way to his face. He knew if he opened his mouth to gag or vomit the creature's appendages would have a new place to explore.

With no warning, the box shifted violently. The top end of it tilted upwards, the rear downwards. His head shot up, banging against the lid of the crate, and the creature tumbled down to his feet again, its claws tearing huge holes in his polo shirt as it was forced off him. He felt the vomit that had become his pillow trickle down the back of his neck, cold and slimy like the filthy trail the creature had left on his legs.

Then the box was moving forwards – or downwards. Freefalling, he was being dropped somewhere. He screamed, tried to brace himself for the inevitable impact.

Impact. A thunderous roar of water striking the base of the box. His body rolled, twisting violently as the box shifted and settled in the water. For a brief moment, the creature in the box with him was forgotten, as the terrible reality of his predicament was clear.

*No grave but the sea.* His initial thoughts were correct. He was in a coffin after all. He was being buried alive. But not in cold, dead earth. A burial at sea.

The box – the coffin, he admitted now – was not watertight. He could feel cold sea water seeping in through the joins, and knew it would only be a matter of moments before the coffin was completely flooded and he began to drown.

Fragments of the conversation with Marsh drifted in and out of his mind.

*...there are some who believe Fairlight can recover its greatness...who better than a priest to understand the true nature of sacrifice?*



The price to be paid. He couldn't believe it. Throwing him to the sea, a sort of sacrifice – was that going to bring back the prosperity the village had had in the old days? What planet were these fuckers on?

Movement. His unseen companion – the only mourner at his burial – was making its presence known again. He cried out in despair. *For fuck's sake! How much more?*

His head was spinning with terror and righteous fury. He was completely disorientated. He didn't know if it was day or night, he didn't know whereabouts in the sea he'd been dumped. He didn't know what to be most scared of. The hungry sea, slowly breaking through his coffin to claim him, or the alien creature once again crawling up his body.

The appendages again – he knew they were tentacles – were stroking his sodden chest now, caressing his chest hair which was matted with sweat and salt water. Seawater lapped around his ears. He forced his head upwards, trying to stop the water rising above his chin and entering his gasping mouth.

He didn't know what entered his mouth first. The saltwater or the tentacles of the creature.

The coffin returned on the morning tide. Ben Marsh watched impassively as Tom and the three other fishermen hauled it onto the stone ramp. With a curt nod to two of his shoal, he stood back to allow them to unscrew the lid.

Steam rose from the interior, curling and rising like mist before dispersing in the warm air. They leaned forwards, expectantly.

Darren Boyd was alive, but he didn't know it. How could he? The gold offering that had come to life in his coffin, the dormant form of the Great Old One who had brought such bounty and riches to Fairlight years before. He had fed well. The gold icon looked significantly brighter, a deeper lustre to the gold and the rubies seemed to sparkle with extra brilliance.

The thing that was Darren Boyd stared wide-eyed at the three men bending over his coffin. Eyes that had seen things no mortal man should have seen, now grey and lifeless, all spark of humanity extinguished. Dead eyes. Fish eyes.

His hair, already thinning and receding, had vanished completely. His scalp was grey, pallid skin that looked dry and shrivelled in the warm sunlight.

The three bearers lifted Darren Boyd out of his coffin. In the dawn's golden light, a blade flashed. Once, twice...then four times.

Ben Marsh stroked the sides of Boyd's neck sympathetically. Three slits on either side flared once, a hoarse, unearthly shriek emitted, a cry of agony as his arms and legs were neatly sliced away with the flensing knife.

"The price to be paid, young man. Did you really think it would involve a killing? We're not murderers. We've moved beyond such things. Father Dagon desires sacrifice, yes. But not death.

"Your soul is what He desires, which He has taken. But He requires one more thing..."

Marsh watched, smiling in satisfaction as the three fishermen each took a limb. Marsh took the last, Darren Boyd's right arm.

“The remnants of your earthbound life. Your arms and legs are only good for land dwelling. Far better for these to be laid to rest in the oceans, to have no grave but the sea.”

Marsh turned to the waiting sea. It made a hissing noise as it passed over the shingle, like some great reptilian creature in anticipation of fresh meat.

Darren Boyd’s right arm flew into the surf, turning like a boomerang. At this signal, the three fishermen threw their trophies into the surf also. They disappeared into the foaming whitecaps, briefly turning them pink, the steel bracelet of Darren’s watch glinting in the sunlight before it sank beneath the waves.

“It is complete. And in return for this great sacrifice, and your final offering, He has given unto you a life of His own. A life you will find unfamiliar, difficult at first. But you’ll adapt. The tentacles Father Dagon has blessed you with will take time to grow. Your gills will be painful to begin with.

“But I have faith in you young man. You show great promise, unlike the previous offering. I believe you might have witnessed him in one of the stone retirement cottages on the seafront? A tragic case, really. Father Dagon did not find his soul...pure enough for Him. The offering was rejected.

“But you...the pendant you wore, crafted in the likeness of Our Father...selected by one who told you she loved you? Ah, it would seem you had been chosen a long time ago!

“Truly, you are a fishman with a difference.”