

Chthon, Mold-Mother and the Sky People

by Greg stolze

“The Earth has a skin, and that skin has diseases. One of those diseases is called ‘man.’”
-W.F. Nietzsche, *Thus Sprach Zarathustra*

Chthonic /ˈθänik/ *adj* **1** of a divinity or spirit: dwelling or reigning in the underworld: INFERNAL <Pluto was the ~ counterpart of Zeus> **2**: relating to infernal deities or spirits : GHOSTLY <~ worship>
-Webster’s Third New International Dictionary

The end of human dominion was multicausal. This makes it hard to lay blame. Was it the industrial revolution and the pollution that eventually boiled the seas? Or was it the suppression of the facts about climate change, dooming us to act too late?

Charlotte thinks it was the UFOs in the fifties, but she would. Ingrid just focuses on the day-to-day.

I tried to get them to share their insights about it in order to keep them off each other’s throats as we started the drive to Pike’s Peak, the highest spot in North America. I should have known it would just be another bone of contention.

“Blaming this on climate change is like feeling proud of being the turd around which the world revolves,” Charlotte says, pushing her eyeglasses up her nose. “We didn’t do this. We couldn’t. Granted, climate change would have been intensely destructive even without the Rising, but to say climate change caused the Rising is to confuse correlation with causation.”

Ingrid snorts in response. “Oh, OK, it’s a coincidence that just about the time we heat up the oceans and the shorelines start receding, that’s when sea monsters come up out of it and start eating everyone,” she says.

“Only the men,” I say, softly. (My name’s Nell).

“It’s possible that the Rising is a response to the Sky People,” Charlotte says, and gives a little giggle of enthusiasm. Christ, she can be hard to take sometimes. Glancing at Ingrid, who’s pinching the bridge of her nose, I know she feels the same.

Charlotte worships the Sky People. Ingrid and I chased her for years, trying to pin Astrid and John Morley’s murders on her. Ingrid’s a police detective—or was. I guess I should say ‘was.’

You could call me Ingrid’s sidekick. I wouldn’t like it, but I can’t argue the point. I stuck by Ingrid’s side, helped her without being in charge, did scut-work, organized the research... fell in love with her, of course.

It may be unfair to say Charlotte ‘worships’ the Sky People, or at least it may be inaccurate, but it’s the closest word I can find. ‘Obeys’ isn’t right, since it implies orders, and she’s not doing what she’s told, she does what she thinks they might want. ‘Reveres’ isn’t quite there either. Reverence makes me think about Christians and Muslims who love and adore their gods, and Charlotte would deny any emotional impulse, except maybe awe and excitement and no small bit of terror.

Charlotte interacts with her beliefs the way a sailor in a hurricane interacts with the wind. She’s scared and trying to survive. But there’s something else there too. Something that relishes

the challenge, that adores the power even when she's one more bit of flotsam trying to stay upright in the deluge.

The Morleys were found with their heads sawed open. No one ever found the brains. There's plenty of evidence that Charlotte knew them, was in the area, was probably the last to see them alive, but it's all circumstantial.

Maybe the end of our time in charge was when we realized there were these powers and intelligences, more vast and strange than anything human. Or maybe it was when one of those powers decided to kill every human with a Y chromosome.

#

The creatures have a dozen names. More, I'm sure. Some Australian newscasts called them "bunyips," which, to my ear, is insufficiently terrifying. In Malaysia, "orang minyak." "Espinass negras" in the Dominican Republic. The New York Post headline was just "WAVE RIPPERS!" when they got the first photos, and honestly, it seems like the best option to me.

They come in different sizes, some a yard of sleek swift coils, others big as school busses. Black, but with that rainbow glaze like spilled oil. They squirm like eels, covered in thorns like a rose stem. They come out of the ocean in piles, big ones pushing little ones, surging and slithering up the beaches of Hispaniola, the Philippines, and the coasts of New Guinea. At first, it was just a weird nature story, like bioluminescent jellyfish. But the fatality count was shockingly high, immediately, and their numbers... Even as armies and navies started opening fire on sight, there were always more.

The US helped, a little. We had tons of guns and were never shy about using them. But it didn't seem immediate until the second wave hit Alaska and the west coast of South America. It wasn't until they started erupting out of oil wells in the Gulf of Mexico that people started panicking. After all, this wasn't just brown people dying on the other side of the world. This was the *oil industry*.

The scariest thing, though, was their selectivity. They attacked bridges to isolate populations for encirclement. They homed in on densely populated seaside cities. They worked in concert, even when separated.

At first, the scientists and newscasters all said they seemed to be some kind of hive entity, like ants who leave trails for other ants to follow. But you can't leave a trail in the ocean, and the fringe people were already saying they were agents of some kind of psychic super-mind.

Charlotte calls it "Chthon" and says it is the darkness in the Earth. The wave rippers, she says, are its children, or its blood, or its hands upon the surface.

Chthon *is* the planet Earth, she says, and it has Risen. It has Risen indeed.

#

The east coast of the US lost its power grid, had widespread civil unrest, and suffered infrastructure failures. But Haiti and the Dominican Republic have gone completely silent, as have some islands in Indonesia. So Rhode Island and Maine and New York got off pretty light—at least, if Charlotte's right. She's made a lot of accurate predictions so far. She said UFO activity would spike. She said the wave rippers would concentrate on the Pacific Rim and the west side of South America. She said that the autopsies would show they were filled with petrochemicals. She said they'd be incredibly tough and strong and smarter than we expected. Right on all counts.

“Earth is enraged,” she said patiently, explaining it to us as we picked over the very few scraps left in a gas station as we moved inland. “The ‘gaia hypothesis’ that planet Earth can function like a single biological entity is close, but not quite right. Chthon is within the mantle, perhaps—a global layer of magnetically-mediated thinking matter, returned to consciousness by a magnetic pole shift.”

“Is that what’s up with the compasses?” Ingrid asked. This was a few weeks back, before the population really plummeted. “Why radio and internet is all patchy?”

“Mm hm! Like an EMP from a thermonuclear bomb, only far more powerful and, eh, without the fallout.” Charlotte has a disconcertingly pretty smile, and she’s free with it.

“How did a *brain* get into the Earth’s crust?” I asked.

“Maybe it was placed there. Maybe the Sky People grew it there and it got out of control! Maybe it evolved there.”

“How could it *evolve*, there’s no sexual generation going on down there. Or is there? Is it hot times down in lava city?” Ingrid is very sarcastic some times. I find it hilarious.

“Look, the last pole shift was something like 500,000 years ago, but if you examine the alignments of iron molecules in layers of old stone, it looks like zebra stripes. That’s not because it happened more often, but because Earth is *really old*. In the course of four billion years, a lot of energy has been bopping around in the mantle and core, and when systems gain energy, they become more organized—entropy in reverse. It’s why cleaning your room requires effort, but letting it get messy doesn’t.”

“If you say so,” Ingrid muttered, pulling a rack of shelves from the wall to see what had fallen behind them. She brushed her hair back in a gesture I secretly enjoy. I told her, once, in private... a kind of intimate moment... and she blushed and said she doesn’t like getting compliments.

“A pattern of energy could become self-sustaining and, in time, get complex enough to think. Four billion years is a long time, and it only had to happen once.”

“So when the poles were one way, it slept, and then when they flipped, it woke up?”

“It explains the areas of intense action! Look, if you consult a map of the attacks, and compare it with topographical data, it’s pretty clear they originate in deep sea trenches, where the Earth’s crust is thin—the Challenger Deep is to the east of the first Philippine and Malay attack sites, the Milwaukee Trench is close to the Dominican Republic, and the Peru-Chile trench hugs the whole coastline there. *But,*” she nearly yelled, raising a finger as Ingrid drew in breath to speak, “There’s also the *control issue*. There’s deeps near Antarctica but the creatures don’t move on that continent because it’s where magnetic flux is most intense, *that’s why you get auroras!* The areas where the attacks are swift and coordinated are all low-flux zones. There are a few spots with higher flux that got attacked because they’re populous and close to trenches, but if you watch the assaults and speed up the film...”

“Why would you do that?” I asked, but Charlotte just steamrolled over me.

“...you see that the creatures there are hesitant and clumsy, moving like a palsied hand instead of the *sure grip* on the magnetically consistent regions! It controls them with magnetic waves, I’m sure of it!”

“Maybe creatures from the molten core didn’t attack Antarctica because it’s cold,” I said.

Charlotte tipped her head and furrowed her brow. “Maybe,” she said.

###

We were sacked out and trying to sleep when the mold-people found us. Or at least I was trying to sleep. Charlotte genuinely was asleep, snoring away softly. Ingrid kept tossing and turning.

“Ingrid, I...”

“Sh!”

I hadn’t heard the first creaking stair, but I heard the second.

“What’s...?”

“Sh!”

The whine of a sticky door hinge called, mournful and threatening through the abandoned two story colonial. We’d made some more distance and found a place to squat without ostentatious gun-toting neighbors silently staring suspicion at us from barricades. The house was distant, with blood splattered all through the first floor, but we’d found clean sheets and beds on the second story.

Now we heard steps in the hall. All of us but Charlotte, who was still sawing logs.

“Close your eyes,” Ingrid whispered, her breath trembling my ear, making the hair on my neck stand on end.

“What are...?”

“Sh.”

I obeyed.

I heard her move suddenly, and then through my eyelids I saw a red wash as light suddenly blazed out.

“FREEZE! SHOW ME YOUR HANDS!” Ingrid bellowed.

“Shit! It’s not! Don’t shoot!”

“SHOW! ME! YOUR! HANDS!” Then the light went out and I opened my eyes.

Ingrid had planned this, if someone came by night, first she’d strobe them with her stupidly powerful mega-lumen tactical flashlight, while I kept my eyes shut and she kept *one* eye shut. Then she’d turn it off and we’d have some night vision remaining while “the intruders” (as she called them) were temporarily blinded.

There were three women holding their hands up, blinking, with Ingrid aiming her service 9mm at them. I put on my glasses and snatched up the shotgun she’d insisted I carry—an argument I was now glad I’d lost.

“What’s going on?” Charlotte sleepily asked from the next room.

“Stay back! We’ve got intruders!”

“Hey, don’t freak out!” one of the women said, wincing and ducking her head.

“I’m cool, I’m not freaking, but don’t try me. How ‘bout you all get on the floor, nice and slow, and put your hands on your heads?”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” one muttered as they all obeyed.

“Nell, cover them. Charlotte, get in here and pat them down.”

“Don’t pat us down,” one said.

“Sorry, but I think it’s necessary.”

So I stood there and aimed the shotgun at them while Charlotte reluctantly entered and started feeling their clothing for weaponry. Then there was a puff of dust and all hell broke loose.

Charlotte made a goose-like sound and started flailing her hands around her face. Ingrid flinched back, grimacing. Then the powder reached me, smelling of broken soil and forest and...

OK, so I did drugs once, back in the Before Times. My high school sort-of boyfriend *said* it was mescaline and I have no reason to doubt him. Well, actually, there are reasons but I'm not going to get into that.

When I inhaled the cloud of spores from the mold-women, everything got blurry and confusing and then briefly every color was neon night-blue. A sensation of *green* coursed through me, a synesthetic sensation of cool oxygenated forest color gliding across my skin, sinking in, hitting my nerves, and then it was like the floor disappeared.

I didn't physically feel acceleration and a plummet, but it was the psychological experience of a plunge. I dropped *under* normal perception, like falling asleep in an instant but retaining lucidity. I was in a mind, something vast and vegetable, and I knew it had been reaching out to humankind for millennia, and not just us but moose and monkeys and jaguars—any mammal that ever ate the right fungus to open a channel to the squishy, alien thoughts of a mycological overmind.

It's hard to explain interfacing with the mold-mind. Normally, to know something, we have to learn it or figure it out, and either way, we recall the process of acquisition. But the mold-mind doesn't need any of that. It can simply load the knowing directly, almost the way a photo is imprinted on paper. There's a moment of exposure, like a flash, and then a lasting image. Something *known*, in the same way you know that *you're* seeing something and not anyone else, the same way you know it's hot or know the texture of your own teeth in your mouth.

FLASH—the mold-mind is billions of years old.

FLASH—like Chthon, magnetic polarity impacts its ability to think, be aware, and reach out its influence.

FLASH—it wants us, all of us, to join it as a symbionts, rather than perish overwhelmed by Chthon's legions.

Then the spores wore off and I started throwing up. Judging by the light, we'd been out for hours.

The mold-women, the intruders, were now the ones standing over *our* prone forms, holding our guns (uneasily) and looking down at us. Ingrid's zip-ties had been found, and now held our wrists and ankles bound.

"I told you not to pat us down," one said.

"You even know how to use that thing?" Ingrid asked, glaring daggers up at the woman with her gun. She had an unkempt afro and the cleanest clothes.

Afro held her gaze steady as she pointed it at the bed and pulled the trigger, making that awful deafening sound, sending a puff of dust and stuffing out of the mattress.

"NO," she shouted, over the ringing in our ears. Then she trained it back on Ingrid, finger inside the trigger guard like an amateur.

"OK, hey, let's be cool," Ingrid said, loudly, hands raised.

"*Now* she wants to talk," the biggest mold-woman sneered. Her hair was in a ragged bob, and she wore baggy coveralls. In the daylight, we could see the discoloration on their faces. The high points, foreheads and cheeks, were clear, while the creases and shadows under their jaws and around their eyes had a little gray fuzz. Its texture cracked a little as their expressions changed, the way a crust on rancid cheese distorts when you cut into it.

"You did sneak up on us," Ingrid said.

"Is this your house? You got the title deed?"

"Please don't hurt us," I said.

"Yeah, likewise. We're sorry, all right?" Charlotte said, giving an ingratiating, hopeful smile.

"It depends. You going to try anything?"

"No," Ingrid said, scowling. "No, you're the boss."

"Why are you here? Your car has Rhode Island plates. You're a long way from home."

"We're going to..." Charlotte started, but Ingrid interrupted her, saying "We're just passing through."

"I hear the coasts are pretty bad," the big one admitted. She had the shotgun, and she now raised it to port arms. It's a heavy thing, I'm sure she was getting tired from holding it trained on us.

"Things are tough all over," I said, and immediately felt inane.

The one with Ingrid's gun turned and looked at me, giving me a real evaluating expression.

"So what did you see when you got the dust?" she asked.

"If you take your finger out of the trigger guard, I'll tell you," I said.

"Nell!" Ingrid cautioned, but even now I don't know what she was warning me about.

"Hm." The woman lowered the gun, stepped back and took her finger out.

"I saw a, a mold-mind," I said. "Something big and ancient and it's waking up in the new magnetic atmosphere, just like Chthon is."

"Chthon?"

"The substrate intelligence," Charlotte said. "The one sending the wave rippers. We theorize it exists in Earth's mantle..."

"You shut up," the leader said, making a terrifyingly casual wave at Charlotte with the pistol. Then she lifted her chin at me and said, "Continue."

"Well... I saw that and I saw that it wants us."

"It wants to *save* us," the woman with the gun said, in the tones of a school teacher correcting a child's times-table.

"Some people don't want to be saved," Ingrid said.

"You can shut up too."

"I..." I said, but the pressure was too much for a verb. "I don't know what else. It seemed really outside. Alien."

"It would have to be, to survive so long. To adapt to such new conditions. I mean, don't you think?" she said.

"I don't know. Please, could you put the safety on? *Please*."

She sighed, then looked at Ingrid, and just like me, I'm sure she could see Ingrid tensing. Getting ready, perhaps, to spring at her.

"You," she said flatly, cocking her head at Ingrid. "Gun girl. You got knocked on your ass by the spores last time. You really think you won't get it again if you tackle me for your fake-dick pea shooter here?"

"I wasn't going to do anything," Ingrid said.

"You're a liar, too." She looked back at me. "So you heard the green voice pretty clearly, sounds like."

"Green voice?" Charlotte said brightly, only to flinch when the woman with the shotgun scowled at her.

"I felt it more like a texture or a temperature," I said, and the leader almost smiled.

"Yeah, it crosswires your sense flows sometimes. You seem receptive."

"Do I?"

"There's a lot more to it. So much more."

“Are you trying to recruit her?” Ingrid had gotten to her knees and half-crawled to get between me and the gun. “Listen, we’re together, you’re not taking her away...”

“Shut up or I am going to kick your teeth in.”

“Nell is staying with—” Ingrid didn’t get to finish that.

Twenty minutes later, I managed to get the bleeding in her mouth to stop.

The kick had been sudden, graceless, but committed, a big clomper boot to Ingrid’s dear face. One tooth came out all the way—thinking about it, we’re lucky none of them broke. Dental work is very hit-or-miss in the time after human dominion.

I screamed and tried to thrash my hands free. Charlotte just scooted away on her butt, trying to communicate by posture and expression that she wasn’t involved and wasn’t making trouble.

“You sure you don’t want to join the great green?” the kicker asked and all I could do was weep and shake my head vehemently.

“What a waste.” She gestured for the others to fall in and they had a short conversation that ended with the big, bobbed one heading off somewhere.

“Hey,” Ingrid said, spitting out blood, voice muffled by her rapidly swelling lips. “Gimme my gun bahk.”

The woman with the afro laughed out loud, surprised and, from the sound of it, genuinely amused. “You’re too much, gun girl,” she said. Then her heavysset friend returned holding a little orange prescription bottle, which she held out to me. When I couldn’t take it and shrank back, she made a little *tsk* sound, handed my shotgun to the third—who hadn’t said a single word the whole time—and then crouched down by my trembling form to tuck the bottle in my pants pocket.

“If you change your mind, eat this,” she said. “It’ll get you in touch and start the symbiosis.”

“OK, we’re done,” the leader said, walking away. “Don’t the the sun set on you here. If the other locals know you talked with us, they’ll set your asses on fire.”

Then they left.

It took a while to hobble down to the kitchen and find something to saw through the plastic shackles, and we were half-convinced they’d have taken our truck. But it was still there, the first aid kit intact in the heavy-duty lockbox. We gave Ingrid some aspirin and stuffed her empty tooth-socket with gauze.

“Fuckin’ thieves,” she muttered.

“They could have grabbed everything we have, but didn’t,” Charlotte said.

“They thtole mah guns!” Ingrid replied, around the reddening white cotton.

“Considering how you pointed those at them, I don’t know that I blame them.”

“Of course yuh don’, you’re jutht as crazy!”

Charlotte laughed, which was, I think, the reaction Ingrid wanted least.

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I don’t want to talk about the spores, but as we get into what used to be Colorado, I feel like I have to.

“I wish you’d to dump that,” Ingrid says. She’s cleaning her new revolver. We were actually able to buy guns in Iowa. They still think gold has value, so once again Charlotte was right. When she told us to loot specialty coin shops in New York state and Ohio, Ingrid scoffed. “You can’t eat gold, you sound like an old-time wingnut. No one needs gold, people need food, bullets... antibiotics.”

But Iowa was far enough from the coasts, no wave rippers so... stores still open. Trying to cope with the influx of refugees. Just to cross the border we had to show US passports and pay “a

tax” to show we weren’t “indigent.” We had to haggle hard for every box of shells. The man who had them smelled terrible and insisted he had a degree in Economics. “With every box of parabellum I sell you, my supply of gold gets bigger, devaluing what you hold, and my supply of bullets gets smaller, placing my remaining stocks in proportionately higher demand,” he said smugly. He wouldn’t consider any kind of single-payment package deal. I got the impression that he was trying to stretch out talking to new faces. Given his behavior, I wasn’t surprised that everyone familiar to him was staying away. It was awful, even though it hadn’t been our gold to start with. It was ridiculous, and bitter.

“I’m surprised she hasn’t ingested those spores yet. I would have.” Charlotte sounds a little jealous.

“Of course you would.” With the swelling down, Ingrid can announce.

“What did you see when you got dosed?” I’ve asked this before, and both of them have been cagey about answering, but this time Ingrid turns her full, breathtaking face towards me from the passenger seat and says, “Nothing, OK? I saw the abyss, the *void*. I experienced what it was like to *not be me*, I had the full feeling of a world spinning along without an Ingrid and doing just fine. That’s what they’re offering you, the opportunity to get your personality digested. You should burn that stuff!”

“Oh wow, you had a classic psychedelic experience!” Charlotte says, interested and pleased. “The annihilation of the ego is highly prized. Don’t you feel more at peace with the idea of death now that you’ve experienced, on a visceral level, non-identity?”

“Are you kidding?”

I turn as Ingrid asks this, she’s bright red.

“Why don’t you put the gun down, Ingrid?” I suggest. She narrows her eyes at me, too—that hurts—but she reholsters it. We’re in a burned-out Stuckey’s, camping under the tables. Colorado is worse than Iowa. No wave-rippers this far from the oil wells of Texas and New Mexico, but the people who fled those states were more panicky and violent, and Colorado must have answered in kind, judging from the corpses we see strung up on some of the telephone poles. One has a home-made “YOU LOOT WE SHOOT” sign around its neck.

“What about you, Charlotte? You get ego annihilation too? Or something more like John and Astrid Morley in a fungal Eden, with the Sky People offering them an apple?” Ingrid says.

“I’ve told you many times, I didn’t harm the Morleys.”

“What *did* you see, Charlotte?” I ask, more quietly.

“Something vast and with a... a kind of immense and brilliant stupidity? Like, it can’t *reason* the way we do, can’t intuit and logically deduce principles, it, it, the mold thing just sees so much and has for so long that it’s accurate and seems wise when in fact, it’s, it’s...” Charlotte’s face crinkles up and she seems to breathe heavier as she struggles to explain. “I think that thing they’re hooking into has ten percent of our ability to actually *think*, but has ten thousand times as much input and experience. It’s not conscious but it has such a depth of, of, of *data* that it can make connections we don’t.”

“So how come you haven’t stolen Nell’s goo and eaten it yet?”

“Because I respect her property,” Charlotte says, stiffly.

“What else did you see in there? What else scared you off joining the mold colony?”

Charlotte folds her arms. “Some of those old books I read, accounts of psychic journeys... well a lot of it’s schizophrenia or fabulism or colored by wishful thinking, but the last time of the titans’ Rising...”

“Titans?” Ingrid says, voice skeptical, but Charlotte’s got a full head of steam and chugs onward.

“...at the time of a previous Rising there was sort of a détente between the Mother of Molds and Chthon, the darkness under the skin of the Earth. This was probably Pangea times, but there were exchanges of, of higher-level multicellular entities between the two. Like writing letters, only the envelopes were animals of some sort. Dinosaurs maybe,” she says, with that bright smile.

“What did they write about?”

“Oh, the *substance* of the exchange is, is beyond the grasp of our little three-pound meatloaf brains!” Charlotte starts gnawing at a thumbnail. The sound of it makes my skin crawl, she knows this but can’t stop herself. Or, at least, she doesn’t stop herself. “But that’s what we’d be to the mold, maybe. Envoys to be sacrificed to Chthon so they could replenish one another’s, er, experience-fields. I recognized Her, and when I entered Her mind I, I sought affirmation of this. And I found it. We would not be welcomed into an equal partnership with that vast fungal psychosphere. We’d just be carrier units. If it even perceives our consciousnesses or cares about their contents, I think they’d ultimately be harvested.”

“Well that sounds nightmarish,” Ingrid says, looking at me.

“So much does these days.” I don’t even know why I say it.

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We see lights in the sky after nightfall. We’re in the Stuckey’s, trying to sleep, trying to feel safe after locking the doors and checking the wood panels over the windows, when we see green and white light out in the parking lot.

I know Charlotte’s awake because she isn’t snoring, and I know Ingrid isn’t asleep because she can’t relax if she thinks Charlotte’s active. (When we first started the trip, she handcuffed Charlotte every night, but the handcuffs got broken in Ohio.) Charlotte rises and goes to the door, which is glass. She stares out.

“Ooh,” she says, like she’s watching fireworks, but even from the floor and my musky sleeping bag, I can tell that’s not what these are. The rays, the shadows they cast, they’re too clean. They move and change direction, they’re not brief and everywhere like Fourth of July airbursts.

I stand too and join her. She’s raised her hands against the glass. Her face is rapt.

They’re in the sky, six of them, three white, two green, one blue with ultraviolet edges to its radiance. They move so fast, then stop instantly. The blue one is a disc, the others are balls. A green one is hovering, it rotates and I can see it’s projecting a beam, like a searchlight, sweeping across the landscape, moving towards us.

“Come away from there!” Ingrid hisses.

“Do you really think we can hide from them?” Charlotte asks.

“That light could fry your eyes out!”

As it sweeps in, I have to squeeze my eyes shut. I raise my arm to shield them and I hope Charlotte does too. I crouch away from the glass, behind the vandalized hostess station, but Charlotte stays standing.

“They’re here. They’re making for the peak.”

#

“I don’t like this,” Ingrid says to me. It’s the day after seeing the UFOs, or the Sky People, or whatever. Charlotte called it ‘the manifestation’ but she always has a portentous name for everything.

“I’m not crazy about it either,” I say. We’re washing up using still-pipe water in a tiny town, something Ingrid saw on her paper map. (GPS is long gone, of course.) She thought there might be people, but everyone we’ve seen is dead. It’s hard to tell what killed them, due to decay—they all dropped about a week ago, I’d guess—but from the property damage and blood spatters and postures, I think it was a gun battle that turned into a massacre. We haven’t found a mass grave, but judging from the circling bird cloud to the south, there is one.

We hoped it was far enough from the main road to have stayed safe, that it might have something working. But all we’ve got is what water was trapped in people’s pipes. It’s not bad. There’s enough rain and river-water that people aren’t fighting over potable yet. Lots of restaurants with walk-in freezers are still cold enough that some of the ice in there has stayed solid. More than once, out east, we mined that and let it thaw to drink. Bottled water is the best, of course, but obviously everyone is taking it.

“I don’t mean the sponge bath,” she says. “Going to Pike’s Peak, it’s... do you still think it’s a good idea?”

“We didn’t have anything better in Rhode Island, and I don’t see what’s changed since then. This *is* better than the coast, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.”

“I don’t know... think about Iowa, for all its flaws. It has, you know, social unity. *Trash* collection. The water’s still running, they still get electricity.”

“But it’s the same gouging dickheads running everything and skimming the cream.”

I shrug. “Look at Chicago then. Full feminist socialism taking over the western suburbs.”

“With *no* electricity,” Ingrid says. “And a feminist takeover is a lot easier when you have ink monsters coming out of Lake Michigan to gut everyone with a Y chromosome.”

“Yes! Yes, they have it *worse* than Iowa but they’re trying to *help* each other, not just blindly profit.”

Dried off, Ingrid shrugs back into yoga pants and a sweatshirt. Her hair’s grown out to an awkward length, but I like how it looks wet.

“Do you want to move back there?” she asks.

“We could. They could use you—you’re strong, fearless, they need people who can keep order.”

Ingrid laughs, but it’s mirthless. “The last thing they want there is more cops.”

“You could be something else.”

“Once a cop, always a cop,” she says.

“No,” I reply.

“I could go south, Texas, the gulf... that’s where they appreciate someone with a law ‘n’ order attitude.”

It doesn’t escape me that she says “I” and not “we” but I don’t mention it. “What if we just go to Pike’s Peak and see?”

“I’m still half-convinced that Charlotte killed that couple. She could know a lot more than she lets on. Maybe we get there, she puts a gift-bow on your head and says ‘Sky People! I brought you a present! Dig in!’”

I laugh. “Charlotte’s hard to take but I don’t think she’ll betray us. She could have escaped after she broke the cuffs. She could have sold us out to the mold-maids.”

“Is that what we’re calling them?”

“They probably prefer ‘Acolytes of the Great Green’ or something,” I say with a smile.

She smiles back, but the gap in front makes my heart hurt. It makes me feel guilty, that she took that kick to keep them from me.

#

“What do you think is going to happen?” I ask Charlotte. We’re on the road to Pike’s Peak. The UFOs are thick, at least a dozen flying madly overhead. They’re out in daylight now—silvery discs and spheres with a queer refractive quality. Most of them seem to be tinted orange or green today, or perhaps the light that bounces off them shifts on the spectrum.

“The Sky People are far-flung across the galaxy, possibly across multiple dimensions,” Charlotte starts, and then the car conks out.

“What *now*?” Ingrid’s in the back seat.

“No, this is not unexpected!” Charlotte’s all smiles. “Often automobiles lose power in the presence of Sky People craft, you must, you *must* know this from the UFO lore!”

“Why?” I ask.

“Maybe they don’t want casualties crashing their private mountaintop chinwag,” Ingrid guesses as Charlotte steers over to the side of the road.

“Or perhaps it’s psychomagnetic jamming.” Charlotte puts it in park and starts unbuckling her seatbelt with a resigned sigh.

“What?”

“Look, we know Chthon controls its children, or influences them, via some kind of radio or magnetic carrier wave. It’s possible the Mold Mother does too—the human brain’s an electromagnetic organ. She sleeps like Chthon does when the poles are shifted. So perhaps the Sky People have methods like an EMP, or like ECM, to keep the other entities’ minions suppressed.”

“Are we going to walk up to the top of the highest point in North America?” Ingrid demands.

“We’ don’t have to do anything, but I intend to,” Charlotte replies, opening the back of the truck and starting to pack water into a bag.

“Nell?”

“...I want to know,” I say.

“Great. Hand me the toilet paper, I’m dropping ballast before we climb.”

The climb sucks for a long time. Ingrid was always in the best shape of us—not her actual shape, though that’s nice too, I mean she was the fittest. But running cross-country in the Rhode Island woods is different from climbing a steep road in thin, *thin* air. We all gasp and take frequent water breaks. Charlotte, the intellectual, the librarian, has the hardest time of it. As the sun sets and the night gets cold, her skin looks clammy and sweaty.

“We... can we... can we stop?” she pants.

Ingrid halts, stretching her back as Charlotte nearly collapses against a guardrail.

“I thought you were the one all fired up about talking to these guys,” she says, pointing upwards as a blue-litten cigar-shape cruises overhead, making a noise almost like a mechanical moo.

“The...” Charlotte tries to spit, takes a drink of water and succeeds the second time. “The spirit is willing... but the flesh... is weak.”

“It’s hard for all of us, Ingrid.”

“Sure, OK,” Ingrid says, looking away from me. “Here, Charlotte, you got water?”

“Plenty.”

“Put some of those in my bag. Or just give me the whole thing, I’ll donkey it up the hill for you.”

“You don’t... have to...”

“Yeah yeah, hand it over.”

As we proceed, Ingrid is the only one with breath left for speech.

“Charlotte. Hey.”

Charlotte grunts in reply.

“For real, did you kill Astrid and John Morley?”

“Ingrid,” I say.

“I won’t even be mad, Charlotte. I just gotta know. This could be the end, right? Their engines could give us fast cancer and turn us into sludge by sunrise, right? So just tell me. Did you kill them?”

“I loved John and Astrid,” Charlotte says. She’s staring down at the road as we walk. So am I, but I look over as she says this.

“Oh, you were lovers? Whoa, there was nothing like that... nothing in their background.”

“We weren’t lovers like you’re thinking. I *loved* them. They were my closest friends, the only ones who...” She stops, staring down, hands on her knees, panting.

“OK, hey, easy. Easy,” Ingrid says. She even helps her over to a boulder by the roadside, somewhere Charlotte can sit and then, suddenly, lie on her back staring upwards.

“Take your time. You need water?”

Charlotte nods, grimacing.

I’m torn. I’ve seen Ingrid do this during interrogations. Push, and push, and then when the door opens, stop pushing. But also... when we’ve been talking, alone and quiet, the same thing. The active listening that makes me feel like I can tell her anything, and I want to. When she makes me feel like I’m the only person in the world.

We both help Charlotte sit up to drink, and there are tears on her cheeks, glistening in the light of the stars and flaring when another light-disc blares overhead.

“They were the ones who knew about the Sky People, at first. They taught me all about it, we were... explorers. Researching together, sifting the lies from the madness from the hidden, tiny tiny roots of the truth. They were really good to me.”

“Yeah?”

Charlotte looks up at the inscrutable craft above us. It’s not far now.

“Astrid was a lot like you, Nell.”

I don’t know what to say, so I just hug myself.

“What happened then? What happened on Federal Hill?”

“They came for my friends.”

“They... the Sky People?”

Charlotte nods.

Ingrid waits.

“The Morleys... they knew what was coming. They wanted to live forever, be free of mortal bodies, exist as pure mind. That’s what they thought it was.”

“Did the Sky People scoop out their brains?” I say this without thinking for even a second. If I’d thought, I’d have bit my tongue, but Charlotte looks away before nodding again.

“Jesus! And you want to see them again?”

"I've talked with them," Charlotte whispers. "Before the radios went down, they called me. I heard them in radio static, on my cell phone, on the speakers in my car. They said they were coming back and that I should get ready."

"Did they tell you to go to Pike's Peak?" I asked.

"Yes. You two don't have to do it but... I'll ask... if you can. If you want to."

"Hell no!"

"Well I know *you* won't Ingrid," Charlotte says, and she must be getting a second wind because she sounds irritated.

"Nell won't either!"

"You do that a lot, you know. Answer for her."

"I do not!"

"You do, actually," I say.

She looks at me. "*Do* you want to... to do this?"

"If I say yes, will you come with me?"

She thinks about it a long time, looking me right in the eye, before she nods.

#

The light is waiting at the top of the mountain. It's a shape, but it's all light, all colors, intricate, beautiful without seeming at all designed. It doesn't look planned or made, it looks like it has always existed and always will. Almost painfully incandescent and then a black square opens in it.

"Charlotte." The voice from within is clearly synthetic, but has some ghost of human timbre to it.

"John?" she wheezes in reply.

"John. And. Astrid. We. Are. Now. Together."

"John and Astrid *Morley*?" Ingrid says, staring into the darkness. It's impenetrable.

"We. Are. Their. Thoughts."

"What does that mean?" Ingrid demands, and I love her more than ever. Fearless, or at the very least acting like it.

"Their. Brains. Were. Scanned. Their. Thoughts. Were. Assembled. Their. Structure. Remains."

"What about feelings?" I ask.

"Feelings. Are. Chemicals. Without. Flesh. We. Exist. Purely."

"You don't have love? Charlotte loved you!"

"Love. Is. Complicated. Thoughts. And. Hormones. Form. Affection. Admiration. Loyalty. We. Retain. Something. Of. Love."

"How can you without feelings?"

"Is. Not. Love. More. Than. An. Impulse."

Ingrid and I exchange a look, both horrified.

"Charlotte, don't do this. You've got life. You can do more, even with the Earth all fucked," Ingrid says.

"I'm tired, Ingrid. My feelings aren't making me happy. My body's failing too, everything hurts..."

"You just climbed a damn mountain!"

"It's more than that. I'm older than you two. I'm ready to be done with aches and memory loss, and crushes, and being cranky when I don't get enough to eat." She starts towards the blackness.

“Wait,” I say.

“John? Can I visit them? Can I contact them the way you contacted me? Nell’s been a friend to me—Ingrid too, in her way. They kept me safe.”

“The. Coasts. Fall. To. The. Mind. Beneath. Far. From. The. Water. The. Fungus. Spreads. They. Are. Meeting. At. The. Edges.”

“Will they fight, or negotiate, or... or something else?”

“We. Do. Not. Know.”

“Is there a place for humans between them?” I ask.

“If. You. Can. Make. One.”

I finger the bottle in my pocket, the Mold Mother’s invitation to me. “Will you help us?” I ask.

“If I can,” Charlotte says, “I will.”