

—OBSIDIAN SEA

by Kurt Kirchmeier

Trammel caressed the trigger of the flare gun, once again resisting the urge to squeeze it true. Although the sea itself had settled, the storm-kneaded waters flattening out like so much cerulean dough, a thousand black spheres continued to bob in his periphery, riding the waves like onyx balloons set adrift. Some had swelled to the size of bowling balls, while others remained no bigger than the hailstones Trammel had initially mistaken them for. He wondered now about the lightning, if perhaps he'd mistaken that, too.

For all his panicked rowing, for all his grunting and splashing and adrenaline-fed desperation, the mysterious spheres were no further away at present than they had been at the very outset. It was as though they were attached to the raft by tethers unseen, held in place by forces ineffable.

Well past the point of exhaustion now, Trammel simply slouched in the stern and waited, his arms and his back aching from exertion, the cool evening wind made cooler by the sheen of sweat on his skin.

Spent thunderheads patched the horizon like oblongs of rust; the ochre sun had begun to set, following the path his thirty-foot trawler had taken just a short while before.

Empathy. Trammel had named the boat thus to spite his father, who had attempted to impress upon his only son the belief that such a trait would get him nowhere. It seemed the old man had had the right of it, after all.

More than anything, Trammel had hoped to leave behind him sons and daughters of his own, children to carry his name as well as his spirit, but with his future hinging on the results of the single flare, of one small distress signal loosed at an endless sky, the idea of a living legacy was beginning to seem unlikely at best.

Unlikely, but not impossible; as tempting as it was to swear off patience and just let fly the brilliant projectile now, to follow up on the whistling shot with one last prayer, Trammel knew he'd have a better chance of being spotted after dark. He shuddered at the thought of a whole night spent surrounded, a whole night spent listening to the eerie hum.

He'd failed to notice the monotone sound through the duration of his failed escape, but now that he'd become aware of it, he could hear nothing else. Low and deep and continuous, it brought to mind meditating Buddhists as heard from a distance. The Zen analogy, however, ended there.

He cupped his ears and took a deep breath, expelled the air from his lungs in a long steady stream. How the myriad globes could even float was beyond him, for

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they'd descended upon his trawler with a weight and fury exceeding grapeshot, puncturing the roof of the cabin, perforating both the deck and the hull. The sound had been deafening, a million miniature fists pounding on wood and fiberglass and cold Atlantic water, the hail and the spray and the fragments reducing visibility to virtually nil.

That he himself had somehow passed through the carnage unscathed seemed nothing short of miraculous. It was almost as if the violent rain of black had avoided him intentionally, as if it had made a conscious, premeditated even, decision to keep him alive. Why this would be didn't bear contemplation.

Every so often, a dorsal fin could be seen amidst the many orbs, a curious knife in the water, but never did the sharks stay long; nor did any of them see fit to drag one of the unearthly objects down for a little taste. Hungry enough to investigate, yet too wary to eat--probably not a portentous sign, thought Trammel.

The raft continued to rock, seconds turning into minutes and minutes giving way to hours. Darkness settled about the sea like a blanket, the crescent moon sheltering behind a thick bank of ominous cloud. The water was glass now, but no less sinister for all its lack of turbulence.

The spheres continued to encircle the raft, staring up from the midnight broth like a thousand obsidian eyes. Still no sign of another ship. Still no sign of the shore.

Trammel blinked hard and rubbed his eyes. Perhaps it was too much sun and too little water, or maybe it was the hours of physical exertion and compound stress finally catching up to him; whatever the case, the strange hum soon began to sound almost tranquil, a morbid sort of lullaby.

For a while he fought his weariness, frequently splashing water in his face and occasionally screaming into the empty night, but eventually the strain on his lids became too great.

Even in sleep, escape remained elusive.

Trammel's eyes had scarcely closed in earnest when he sensed a sudden otherness inside his mind. Like sentient probes, they assailed him, every memory they touched given life in the form of a dream. Lucid throughout, Trammel wondered what it was they were doing, what they were searching for.

They lingered long in his childhood, corkscrewing through recollected scenes like wisps of curious smoke, pausing now and again as though to examine the nuances of human interaction, the social hierarchy of man. And through the course of the million-shot slideshow grew an air of studious zeal and grim intent.

Trammel awoke to the sound of splashing.

Despite the absence of the moon, he could still make out those spheres that were nearest the raft, though no longer were they spheres at all. The once-black shells were now fleshy and misshapen, and contorting in a way that bespoke of life within. Life attempting to get out. Some bore singular arms at either side, groping hands paddling them in hopeless circles. Others raked at the waves with two.

One by one, they approached, the sickly white and almond tanned, the olive and the brown, skin-sacks of forming tissue and shifting cartilage, all of them flailing and thrashing at the tar-black waters, some with fully-formed fingers and some with only stumps.

Brandishing an oar like a club, Trammel reared back and swung at the first one