

# **The Deep One**

By

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Ruby could tell the young, dark stranger had noticed her face. Even a man with such a frank and steady gaze couldn't hide it from her practiced eye. Now he'd made her speak about it and she didn't like him for it.

'Barn fell on me.'

'That must have hurt.'

'I don't remember,' Ruby muttered.

'Well, I'm sorry.'

Ruby took the coffee pot from the stove, filled an enamelled mug and put it on the counter. Keeping the left side of her face turned away was an old habit, so was fixing her corn yellow hair so it hung over her scarred brow and cheek, a style she'd copied from an old magazine.

The stranger carried his coffee to the table beside the window. Now it was Ruby's turn to look at him. She let her eyes drift sourly across his wide, confident shoulders and down his sinuous hips and legs. Then he sat down, scraping the chair legs across the bare boards. Ruby knew ordinary men weren't interested in her, so she got on with cleaning the counter and tried to put him from her mind.

And tried yet again to stop thinking about how having a polio leg in an iron calliper stopped you jumping back from rotten, falling timbers like everyone else. And how half a pretty face didn't do a girl any good at all.

He was looking at her again. He lifted his mug, 'Good coffee.' His face wasn't much, pasty and a little jowly, a red silk bandana round his neck, tucked into his pale grey shirt. His dark brown hair was slicked back with some fancy east coast oil so it looked like he'd been caught out in the unseasonal storms that had been building for

the past week. Not a handsome man, Ruby thought, doing her best to find fault, not a nice man either. A nice man wouldn't notice her face and make her talk about it.

'That's Deke Avery's chair,' she heard the anger in her voice, knowing it was wrong, wanting Avery to walk in and pick a fight, beat the confident stranger, punish him for being plain-looking and ordinary and perfect.

He spread his hands, unsmiling, 'Well, he's not here now. I'll keep it warm until he turns up.'

'You'd better be gone before he does.'

He stared out the window 'Thanks for the warning.'

Suddenly she felt bad. 'You want some more coffee?'

'Surely,' he pushed back his chair.

'I'll bring it round.' Ruby wanted him to see, wanted to make him notice her, to hear the clump of her wooden boot, the jingle of the buckles on her calliper under her long, dusty blue frock. She studied his face, but he didn't smile and he didn't frown. He just watched her lopsided gait, watched her pour his coffee, watched her spill a little, and watched her limp back behind the counter.

Then Sean Mahoney loped gangle-legged up the steps and into the store. He looked down at the stranger in the chair, then Ruby.

'I already told him,' she said.

'Deke's a big man, mister. Got friends too. He was at the parade back in '25, the one Coolidge saw, even spoke to Hiram Evans.' Mahoney's thumb rasped the stubble on his narrow chin, 'That your palomino out there?'

Ruby felt tired, tired of everything, the store, her endless routine, every day the same. 'What do you want, Sean Mahoney?'

Mahoney dug his hands into his pockets and twisted on his heels. He glanced at the stranger. 'Nothin, Ruby. Maybe a little tobacco, put it on my tab.'

'I don't run a slate for you no more.'

The stranger stopped drawing lines through the spilled coffee and pushed his tobacco pouch across the table, 'Be my guest.'

Mahoney's eyes narrowed, the tip of his tongue slid between his lips. He took up the pouch and broke off a piece of the moist, flaked leaf. At the door, he dug a coin out of his denims and tossed it on the floor, 'Don't need your charity, mister.'

Ignoring the coin, the stranger took his cup back to the counter. 'Name's Asher Woodward,' he said.

Ruby took his hand reluctantly. It folded round her fingers, held them the same way he stood - with ease, with assurance.

'Ruby Decker.'

'Awkward customer.'

'No more than usual. Put a man in a white hood, he starts thinking he's something he ain't.' Ruby kept her eyes on the far end of the counter, head turned to the left.

Woodward cleared his throat, 'It sure is close weather you're having, Miss Decker.'

'What brings you to these parts, Mr Woodward?'

'I've bought some upland territory from the old Allingham estate.' He gestured across the dry plain towards the Catalina hills, 'Up there. Not much good for cattle, but there's a stream that runs down to Sabino Creek, and plenty of trees. Old redskin hideout, they tell me.'

'Broken Valley?'

'That's the place. Do you ride?'

She couldn't stop herself, couldn't hide her smile. 'Oh, I love to ride,' she said and immediately felt foolish.

He looked round. 'Well, I've got to go. If you fancy a look around I'm up there most days, unless I'm down here for supplies.'

'I'm always in the shop, Mr Woodward.'

He looked at her so intensely Ruby was driven to turn her face further away, nervously tugging her hair down against her torn cheek.

'Good day to you then, Miss Decker.'

Ruby stood there long after the doorbell had stopped ringing.

~

For Ruby, to be on horseback was to be set free. She headed out of town and across the open scrublands, the ground still drying out from the heavy rain a few days past. It meant there wasn't much dust, but the air was still heavy and close. More rain was coming. Riding was like flying, lifted free of the earth and clumsy legs, beyond the sight of other people's eyes.

She'd saved hard for her special saddle. Light enough for her to manage on her own, it was the most precious, treasured thing she owned. The wooden box steps in the stable were all she'd needed to saddle and mount Ellie, her old and placid sorrell.

As she rode, Ruby thought about Asher Woodward and his expensive palomino. He didn't ride badly for an east-coast man, sitting easily in his fancy European saddle. Thunder rumbled and she looked up at the high Catalina hills.

Overhead the sun burned behind heavy, motionless clouds. Soon it would rain, hard rain, bringing wind and floods and mud slides. And afterwards, clear skies, fresh wind and a wild, frantic blooming in the prairie. Ruby wondered what the east coast was like, imagining the sea was chill and deep and dark. No wonder Woodward was such a cold, pale man. She felt a flicker of resentment, he was an intruder, an outsider with no business buying Arizona land. On impulse, she turned her horse towards the hills.

Humidity and heat increased as she climbed into the mesquite and she let Ellie slow her pace. The trail followed the stream, flowing down from Broken Valley between shallow banks. Ruby's dress clung to her back and thighs in the clammy heat as she urged her horse down into the stream to let it drink. The thought of shucking her dress and cooling off was tempting but impractical, there were few places up in the hills she could remount on her own, this wasn't one of them. In any case, the stream was shallower than she expected, the recent rains had made little difference to flow or depth.

Ruby contented herself with a mouthful of water from her canteen before urging her horse back onto the trail.

Feathery-leaved velvet mesquite gave way to ponderosa pine as the trail emerged above Broken Valley. Cresting the ridge, Ruby rode down a gently sloping trail through heavy air under the silent, motionless pines. After several hundred yards, a break in the trees gave a view down onto the sweltering, marshy valley below.

Now she could see what Woodward was doing, the explanation for the shallowness of the stream. Down in the bowl-shaped valley the creek was flooding,

spreading through the reed banks, fragile balsam and jointed horsetails. At one place the water spread almost across the valley. It was far too broad and deep for the recent rains, there could only be one explanation: Asher Woodward had rebuilt Broken Valley's dam, reconstructing the natural blockage where the bottom narrowed between two bluffs. Seventy years ago General Crook dynamited the dam to deny water to the last Apache and Chiricahuas renegades. But Crook had been mistaken, according to Ruby's grandfather the Indians had shunned Broken Valley.

Today the valley was deserted. Heat from the sun broke through the pine-shade, prickly and humid. The storm would not today, tomorrow's heat would be worse. Ruby's horse dropped its head, nuzzling at a tussock of grass, too tired to crop the blades.

Then Woodward stepped into view. Ruby shifted in her saddle. Stripped to the waist, Asher Woodward stood at the water's edge and cast something out across the flat, dark pond as if he were sowing seeds. Out across the water small ripples and surges began, delta waves meandered across the surface. Woodward bent down, splashing water over his neck and chest. Then, as Ruby watched, he pulled off his long boots, stepped out of his trousers and stood naked amongst the reeds.

Ruby leaned forward, gripping the horse's flanks with her thighs. Asher Woodward's body was pale and lithe, his muscular back barely tapering from broad shoulders to sleek flanks and dimpled buttocks. Wading out into the black water, he sank first to his calves, then his hips. The flood was much deeper than Ruby had imagined. Further out, the water rippled again, small waves raced towards Woodward then died. Waist-deep in the flood, Woodward sank to his shoulders, pushed forward, kicked once, and sank beneath the surface.

The waves of his submersion spread and faded. Ruby watched intently. The reeds steadied, the water grew still. Woodward did not surface.

Ruby's heart was racing, her breath hot in her mouth. She moistened her lips and tried to swallow. Silence spread across the heat-drenched landscape. Ruby sat lost in thought, a fantasy of touching Woodward's lithe, clean body. Sweat ran down her neck, trickling across her collarbone, the saddle hard and hot under her thighs. The sullen heat had made her feet and legs swell, Ruby became aware of the ache from her brace. She needed to loosen the straps, but couldn't reach, didn't trust herself to reach down or lift her leg out the stirrup.

'Come, Ellie,' she whispered, patting the pony's neck, and turned the horse back up the trail. Such thoughts were nothing but dreams and wishful thinking. At the top of the ridge, Ruby left the track and headed into the open woods, towards a place she knew, an outcrop of flat rocks where she could safely dismount.

Back on the ground, Ruby tethered her horse, took the canteen and walked on, through open scrub oak. A few minutes walk brought her to a grassy glade formed by an ancient, fallen pine, its dead roots still clasping a sandstone boulder torn from the earth. Ruby set her back against the stone, pulled up her skirt and unbuckled the calliper. The deep muscular ache faded as she eased the calliper off her wasted leg, and massaged the strap marks on her narrow shin and withered thigh.

Even here, in the shade and the shadow of the root-mass, it was too hot, too humid. Her dress felt like a rag, an annoyance to her body. She drank from the canteen, the water too warm to be pleasant. What she wanted was to plunge into Woodward's pond, but he was there, nude, muscular, and foreign.

The heat was enervating, Ruby let her eyes fall shut. Swimming was almost as liberating as riding, freeing Ruby from her graceless walk, letting her move her body freely. When she was very young she had run with the other children. Then the fever came, stiffness, headaches, pins and needles. Two weeks later, when the fever abated, the muscles of her leg were already withering. From then on, whenever her friends played, she had to sit and watch. Except when she could swim. Except when she was stupid and followed everyone into the old barn.

Ruby's hand strayed to the hard, ragged scar blighting her face. She should have gone down to the water, Woodward wouldn't have cared. She knew even a strangeling like Woodward wouldn't have looked at her twice.

Lifting her canteen, Ruby trickled water over her face. It ran down her chest, making her sweat-soaked dress cling to her stomach and lap. On an impulse, Ruby slipped her arms from the short sleeves, then pulled the dress down to her waist and leaned her bare back against the cool stone.

The silence of the glade was peaceful. Far off a woodpecker hammered. A faint breeze ruffled the grass, slid whispering over Ruby's skin and faded away. Ruby grew drowsy, the memory of Woodward, dark water swirling round his naked thighs, drifted through her mind. Idly, Ruby's hand lifted to her still damp chest, her fingertips brushed across one dark nipple, then the other. Slowly circling her palm over her breast she felt the tip rise, harden, tingling in response to her touch. Her other hand rose to her throat, gently stroking her neck before slowly dropping down, nails lightly scratching between her breasts, then down again, to her stomach.

In her mind, as her fingers pushed under her skirts, Asher Woodward slid through the water of the lake. This time he emerged to face her, muscles taut, skin

wet and gleaming. And her legs moved apart as he rose clear, as she touched herself her whole body lifted.

Her fingers opened her sex and slipped inside, first one, then another, pressing down between her soft, hot inner lips, forward and back, then down, into her, drawing wetness up from deeper inside.

Heavy, water-laden wind stirred the glade again, rustling leaves, touched her bare thighs, drifted over her exposed body. Ruby gave a quiet little sigh, brought her hand to her mouth, tasted her slick fingers. She looked down at her own breasts, watched herself stroke and tug her hard nipples while her other hand pushed into her wet, open cleft, then slipped out and up, teasing, rubbing the little hooded nubbin that had risen up, aching to be touched.

With two fingers, Ruby stroked and rubbed, gently, steadily, her sex the focus of a pleasure that filled her whole body like a vessel. She gave a gasp, an inhalation, and arched her back, her breasts raised like an offering to the sky, because now she could feel it in the pit of her body, gathered deep within her loins, then suddenly filling her, rushing into her stomach, her chest, her arms and legs, along with the desire to be held, and to hold.

Afterwards, she just lay there, feeling golden. For a short time every dissatisfaction in her life was forgotten, and there was just the moment.

Then she heard a crunch of dry leaves. Something moved on the far side of the fallen tree. Ruby froze.

It came again, a dry, stealthy, scuffing like a single step. Ruby pulled up her dress and straightened her skirts. Hastily, quietly, she buckled her leg-brace, all the time looking, listening. Then she pulled herself to her feet and turned.

There was nothing. Just a branch jouncing, and in the distance a jay, dipping and gliding away through the trees. Ruby hurried back to her horse and rode back to town.

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Mid-afternoon the following day Deke Avery and Sean Mahoney drove up to Ruby's shop in Avery's bull-nosed pickup. Avery frightened Ruby, his slow, deliberate movements, correct speech, and flat smile created an unconvincing montage of proper behaviour. Standing at the counter, counting his money, Avery filled the shop with suppressed menace.

Avery bought some tobacco and he bought a jar of whisky. For the next hour he and Mahoney sat on the veranda steps, Avery's shotgun propped against the wall, while they smoked and passed the whisky jar back and forth. Mahoney's high, whinnying laugh drifted in on the tobacco smoke at unpredictable moments, Avery kept his voice low, an indistinct, intense monotone, and never laughed.

Low, heavy clouds covered the sky, a restless, turbid blanket. The weather needed to break, it had to break, or before the day was out, the sheriff would come and Deke Avery would get thirty dollars or thirty days.

Ruby didn't want to be there when it happened. She wanted Avery move on, all she could think of was to close shop. Then she saw Asher Woodward come round the stand of white oak on his palomino.

Immediately her mind was full of the memory of him plunging into water. She waited, watching, as he tethered his horse and hung his saddle-bags over the rail. He tipped his hat to Avery and Mahoney as he walked up the steps, they ignored him, stared out across the scrub and said nothing.

As Woodward came through the door Mahoney laughed, a little too long, a little too loud. Ruby wondered why some things could never change.

'Good day, Miss Decker,' Asher Woodward took off his hat, his hair slicked back as always, habitual bandana around his neck, 'Those gentlemen been drinking a while?'

'Some. I'd advise you not linger.'

'I seldom let a drunk determine the course of my day, Miss Decker.'

'Deke Avery gets drunk, he gets mean,' Ruby said.

Woodward nodded thoughtfully, then ordered packs of coffee beans and Demerara, a roll of canvas, three ounces of wood nails, needles and cotton; general supplies any man living on his own might need.

As she moved round the store, Ruby realised the situation had become far worse. At first she'd been pleased to see Woodward, when he'd come in the door she'd tried to stand straighter, to soften the clump of her boot on the floorboards. Now she wished he'd leave. Asher Woodward's pride would keep him here, he didn't know Avery, how he could engineer a confrontation. They'd argue, and they'd fight, and Avery would beat him in her store.

'And one of your fine coffees,' Woodward said. 'No matter how I try, I can't get my brew like your own.'

Mechanically, Ruby served the coffee. What else could she do, refuse to serve? It wasn't Woodward she wanted gone.

Sean Mahoney kicked open the door, sending the bell jangling like a crazy thing. Woodward turned slowly, one elbow on the counter.

The door still quivered on its hinges, Mahoney went over to the table by the window, 'We want to play cards, it's too clammy in here for Deke.'

'You leave my furniture alone,' Ruby said. 'This gentleman's a customer and he'll want to sit down and drink his coffee.'

Mahoney dismissed Woodward with a lopsided leer, 'He don't mind, do you, mister?'

'Not at all, I'll stay here and guard the counter with Miss Decker.'

'You shouldn't act clever.' Mahoney's jaw moved like a goat chewing. 'It don't suit you.'

Woodward's smile grew distant, he placed his mug on the counter with slow deliberation.

'You got to buy something,' Ruby blurted out.

Mahoney stared at Ruby like she'd said something stupid, 'Put some tobacco on the slate.'

This was just the preliminary, Ruby couldn't help herself, she had to play her role. 'Not likely,' Ruby folded her arms, 'I know you too well.'

Mahoney smirked, somehow it had been the right thing to say. 'Not as well as you could, Ruby Decker. Not if there was no moon, and I was prepared to squint a bit.'

Mahoney dragged the chairs out of the store, letting them bang against the door frame. On the other side of the counter, Woodward calmly sipped his coffee. Ruby felt stiff with anxiety, surprised at the protective feelings she had for Asher Woodward. Soon Deke Avery would come inside and pick a fight, it was the way his drinking went. Woodward was young and strong, but he wouldn't stand a chance.

The door banged again as Mahoney returned for the small table, chucking as if he'd just heard a good joke. 'The girls out east must be real homely, mister. I'd want something stronger than coffee before courting round here.' Mahoney dragged the table outside, the door swung shut on its spring.

Woodward took a long pull on his coffee then set the mug down again. 'Tell me, Ruby, is that a fair representation of the menfolk around here?'

Ruby began cleaning the counter, head down, pushing the cloth in fast, hard circles, 'That's about it.' She kept on wiping, moving closer to Woodward's mug. She could feel him looking at her, feel the pressure of his gaze. Under those clothes, she thought, I know what you're like.

Woodward didn't move his mug. Ruby looked at him, sideways. She realised that when Asher Woodward smiled it transformed his rather plain, pale face. Those grey eyes sparkled.

'Boston, let me say, Ruby. Boston might be politer and it might smell better, but it's no less mean.'

Ruby grinned, forgetting herself enough that she almost turned to face him. Then she remembered, ducked her head, hand halfway to her cheek.

Woodward was no longer smiling, 'You should change the way you do your hair.'

His words fell into her stomach like stones into water. Ruby turned her back, the cloth twisted tight in her hands, 'Finish up, stores closing.'

'Look at me, Ruby,' Asher Woodward splayed his fingers on the counter, 'Look at my hand.'

Ruby looked. The fingers on Woodward's hand were webbed past the first joint.

'We're not like them, Ruby. You and I. We're set apart from the world but it doesn't mean you have to be alone. There are other lives to be lived, other worlds. When I said you could ride up...'

Breath stilled in Ruby's chest, she put her hand beside his. 'I did... The other day.'

'I know.'

Before she could turn away, before anything else was said, or not said, shadow and light in the shop moved as the door was pushed open, and Deke Avery ducked his head and walked in.

Ruby knew he would be drunk, knew this was how it always started. She could see it in his watery, low-lidded gaze, smell it in the sweat staining his shirt and beading his lips.

Avery's spoke in a slurred rumble, 'Nice horse you got out there. Thought I'd take a look at the owner. Thought I'd ask the opinion of an educated east-coast man.'

Ruby pulled her hand away from Woodward's, 'Don't,' she whispered.

Avery stood with clenched fists hanging by his sides, 'We've been talking about what Dr Evans says about niggers and Catholics and Jews.'

Woodward's wrist turned, coffee spilled onto the counter. Idly, he traced loops and swirls with his finger, 'I don't know the man.'

'He's got the same ideas about the retards and cripples.'

Although it was still light outside, the interior of the shop darkened. Finally, the storm must be breaking, too late. On the veranda Sean Mahoney, whisky jar over his shoulder, sauntering towards Asher Woodward's horse.

Avery stamped into the centre of the room, he rolled one shoulder, then the other, 'What do you think we should do with niggers and cripples, mister?'

Ruby knew the answer, she gripped the counter, too frightened to move. Beside her, Woodward continued to draw in the counter, a small labyrinth of jagged geometric shapes.

He's as terrified as me, Ruby thought. Avery's going to wreck my store and Woodward will try and stop him. Dear God, please don't let him be too badly hurt.

'I asked you a question,' Avery stamped forwards, 'You plain deaf, or just rude?'

Ruby heaved open the hinged counter-flap. 'Run, Asher. Quickly, through the back.'

But as the flap banged down on the counter, Woodward straightened, turned, and said, 'Deke Avery.'

Taken off guard, Avery halted in mid stride.

Woodward flicked the last drops of coffee from his fingers, to the right, ahead, to the left. Night shadows ran like ink from the corners and angles of the room, out from behind the bins, down from the shelving. Asher Woodward strode towards Deke Avery, arms spread to embrace him.

From the veranda Mahoney's shout of pain and fear as the palomino snapped at his arm.

Avery swore and swung at Woodward, little more than a hulking silhouette in the centre of smoking shadows.

Through the dimming, darkening light Ruby saw Woodward seize Avery's shoulders. A high-pitched shriek filled the store, a desperate, almost animal sound: Deke Avery screaming.

Avery broke away with a pitiful, terrified, broken sob. Arms flailing, he crashed backwards through the door and down the steps. Mahoney pulled him to his feet, they staggered to Avery's pickup, wrenched open the doors and flung themselves inside. Engine screaming, the pickup sped away, tyres spewing dirt, fish-tailing across the bend in the trail.

The store lightened, shadows melted, the darkness lifted from Ruby's eyes.

Woodward pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands, 'Storms are brewing, Ruby.' Before he left, he kissed her on the forehead, tenderly, like he had known her for years, 'Fear not, this store is a sanctuary.'

Ruby stared after him while the touch of his lips cooled on her forehead and the swirls he had drawn with the dregs of his coffee sunk into the counter.

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That night, even with the windows open, Ruby's room was stifling. Clouds hung over town, hills and desert like a blanket, the air refused to move. Ruby lay naked and restless under a single sheet, too weary to rise, too hot to sleep.

Then her mind cleared and she was fully awake. Wrapped in the sheet, Ruby went to the window. The leaves of the white oaks hung motionless, the whole world was still, silent and grey, without a breathe of wind. Ruby looked at her bedside clock, despite the heat she had slept past midnight.

Then it came.

Soundless, quieter than an idea, less than a suggestion, it slipped across the landscape of the night and touched her:

Ruby.

And again, calling.

Ruby let the sheet fall. A faint sweet-almond perfume drifted up to her. As she breathed it in her heart raced, a flutter began deep in the pit of her stomach. Feeling as if she was inside a dream, Ruby buckled on her leg brace and pulled a dress over her bare shoulders. Barefoot, she padded down to the stable.

Ellie whickered softly then stood motionless as Ruby put on the saddle and tightened the belly-strap, only waking fully when Ruby slipped the reins over her head and pushed the bit into its mouth. Then Ruby climbed the steps, swung into the saddle and rode out into the sweltering night.

Thunder grumbled far behind the Catalina hills. Grey light flickered in the empty spaces above a hushed world. Tonight the stars had gone, swallowed by the lowering, sullen clouds. Ruby rode without thought as she passed through the desert scrub and up into the hills.

A cooler, wetter breeze blew at the top of the ridge. Air saturated with moisture pushed through her dress, pressing against bare, damp skin beneath the material.

Asher Woodward met her where the trail opened out onto a small water meadow thick with rustling scouring rush at the margins. He was barefoot, red bandana high round his throat, a hurricane lamp in his hand.

Woodward took the bridle and tethered Ellie to a young willow. He lifted Ruby down, his hands at her waist, her hands on his shoulders.

She stood unsteadily, Woodward took her arm and she leaned against him. The lake had grown in the days since she had watched him swim. Spreading shallows were covered in fresh growths of mosquito fern. Further out, the silky black water was full of movement as long, sinuous grey shapes broke the surface, pushing over and across each other.

'What are they?' Ruby said.

'Star-fish, they swum down from constellations beyond far Achernar. An ancient colony lay dormant beneath the mud, now the stars are right for them again.'

Asher knelt, drawing Ruby down with him. He studied her face, instinctively Ruby turned her head to one side.

Woodward gently cupped her jaw in his hand, 'Don't, Ruby, turn away no more.'

Ruby looks at him from the corner of her eye. Asher Woodward holds up his webbed hand for her to see. Against her face, his fingers are softer than she imagined. This close, he has a salty, sharp aroma. She lets him turn her face round. For the first time in many years she looks someone straight in the eye.

Asher touches her scarred face, he traces the jagged line of it down from her forehead, across her temple and cheek to the corner of her mouth.

Ruby takes Asher's hand, her eyes still fixed to his, and raises his fingers to her lips. Then she reaches out and begins to unfasten his shirt.

Lightning flickers soundlessly across the sky illuminating Woodward's sleek, muscular stomach and shoulders. The buttons running down the front of Ruby's dress fall open at his touch. Asher gazes on her bare torso then lifts her up and clasps her to him. Despite the heat, Woodward's skin is cool against her breasts. Ruby pulls back, moves her body from side to side, swollen nipples grazing across his chest, then slips free of her dress.

Ruby unbuckles Asher's belt, drawing it slowly out of the loops. She grips his cool hips, dips down to kisses his stomach, then unbuttons him. He's naked underneath, lean, half-erect, thick-veined. He steps out of his clothes and crouches in front of her, stroking her flanks, hands running over her hips, down her thighs.

Ruby sinks to the ground and lies back. She holds her arms out to him.

Woodward leans over her, he kisses her mouth and sits back. Then he puts his hands on the straps and buckles of her brace.

'No.'

Woodward lifts her hand away, 'Be utterly free with me, Ruby. Let us cast our old lives away and be made anew.' He pulls the bandana from his throat and lets it fall, 'See me, Ruby.'

Behind them the tree-tops surge in the strengthening wind. Thunder rumbles closer, and in the flickering light Ruby sees the three parallel gashes cutting deep into each side of Asher Woodward's neck.

'They don't hurt, Ruby, they help me breathe.' He gestures at the black, restless water, 'In there, and deep beneath the seas.'

Ruby lets him lift her thin, wasted leg out of the brace. He carries her to the water's edge and lowers her onto the peaty black silt of the shallows. She wants him right now, pulls him down onto her, delights in his heavy body on top of hers.

He enters her in one long, endless thrust. Ruby gasps with delight as she feels him slide far inside her body. His weight presses her hips into the mud, seeping between her buttocks, over her thighs, pooling under her breasts like liquid hands.

Woodward pulls free, she reaches for him, loving the feeling of his slick, fat cock sliding out of her, wanting him back inside again. She cups his balls, dripping black mud, nestles into his groin, kissing his wet shaft, wanting to make him come, empty himself over her body, into her mouth.

Woodward rises and holds out his hand, 'Come with me', he says, his voice thick and strange. 'Come deeper.' He steps back into the black water, submerges, and rises to his knees. Water cascade from the slits on his neck.

'We can live in lakes and seas, Ruby, we can swim together in the ocean depths.' Woodward lifts his face to the sky and exults, 'There are marvels in the deep, cities of wonder, things to dazzle the mind. Things that demand our worship.' He surges to his feet, water and liquid mud pour off his chest, across his stomach and down past his jutting phallus.

I must be mad to come here, Ruby thinks. Am I mad?

The storm wind blows against her skin, warm as breath. She looks down at her naked body, then at Woodward.

'Then let me be mad,' she whispers. 'Let me travel to places no one in their right minds would go, and let me tread forbidden paths.'

She goes to him, walking steadily, feeling a lightness in her body, an unfamiliar strength in her legs. Together, they wade thigh-deep into the dark, disturbed water. Star-fish surround them, swimming languidly in pairs, wrapped in sheaths of clear mucus.

A solitary fish clamps itself high upon Ruby's inner thigh. Its eyes are unblinking black buttons, its mouth a five-fold black star, each petal-like lip tapering to a thin, glistening tentacle that loops and twists across her skin. A detached calm fills Ruby as she looks down at the slick, grey creature working its mouth against her tender skin.

Woodward's hand slips across Ruby's stomach, down through the wet mat of her pubic hair. The edge of his hand brushes across her sex. She thrusts against it as he pushes his hand along the fish's body, gathering the clear, oily mucus.

Ruby wraps her arms round him, her mouth against his smooth chest. Asher pulls Ruby's head to one side, and smoothes the mucus over her scarred cheek and each side of her neck. 'They want to help you, Ruby. They will change you away from this earth-bound life, if you let them.'

After a moment her skin begins to grow warm, tingling, burning like nettle-rash. Ruby touches her throat; the sides feel blistered and tender, the scar on her face a hot, raised weal. Three more star-fish have attached themselves to Ruby's wasted leg and she realises they are giving, not taking. Elation fills her, unfolding inside like an electric flower.

'Let them change me,' she gasps, her mouth against his flat, muscular stomach. 'I want to live a different life.'

Beneath her mouth Asher Woodward is still massively erect. Dipping her head, Ruby touches her lips to the velvety curved head of his phallus. She takes it into her mouth and the taste of him is beautiful. As her breasts dip towards the water the fish from beyond Achernar open their strange mouths. Ruby lowers her nipples onto their five-fold lips. They cleave to her breasts and their lip tentacles spasm with weird alien joy.

It starts to rain, fat heavy drops slapping the surface of the water, smacking against Ruby's flanks. A sudden torrent blasts them, stinging, lashing their skin. Asher pulls Ruby to her feet, the heavy grey fish drop away. Ruby and Asher cling to each other, the rain plasters their hair to their heads and fills their mouths. The squall beats around them, flattening the rushes and horsetails, driving low waves against the shore, and whipping the trees along the ridge.

Ruby pushes her mouth against Asher's and his long tongue fills her mouth with the flavours of oceanic spice and cold green seas. She leans back, driving rain beats on her face, her breasts, streaming across her neck and belly. Her whole body, every nerve in her skin, is alive and aware.

Wild-eyed, Asher flings his arms wide and gives a wordless yell. He lifts Ruby up, lowers her down onto him. Ruby wraps her legs around his hips, marvelling at the new strength in them. Drenched in the night rain they begin a new, sinuous writhe.

The downpour excites the fish and they rise up, seething around Ruby and Asher. Coupling pairs of entwined charcoal-grey torpedo-shapes slip over one another, boiling around their thighs, tentacle mouths gaping.

Ruby stills Woodward with a kiss. She lifts herself off him and wades deeper, leading Asher by the hand, her once-withered leg straight and strong.

If this is a dream, she tells herself, then let it be real. Let it be the whole world that has to wake, and not me.

As the water touches her tingling sex a muscular grey fish thrusts between her legs, endlessly slipping through and away, coating her labia in its slick oil. Immediately she feels the hot tingle of change begin, and her heart, her soul embraces this new transformation.

The storm is overhead. Lightning stalks the Catalina hill-tops, thunder hammers the whole earth. Ruby turns to her new lover, chest-deep in the fish-rich water. Woodward sinks to his knees, his hands slip beneath the surface, circling Ruby's buttocks, his mouth wet on her belly. His face disappears into the water and Ruby feels his long tongue unravel deep inside her, touching her womb, his fingers stroking, his mouth on the mouth of her sex, the deepest kiss.

All around them paired fish float to the surface and roll onto their sides, the lake water whitens in radiant clouds of milt and eggs. Thunder crackles and growls, rolling deep into the mountains as if far underground the very roots of the earth grind together. Shivering with pleasure, Ruby runs her hands over her stomach, cups her breasts. Full of anticipation, her hands rise, drawn to her neck, knowing what she will feel there. As she touches the tender, opening welts each side of her throat she comes, legs shaking so she can barely stand. Asher Woodward surfaces, water cascading from his gills down across his slippery, cold skin. 'Another storm is coming,' he says. 'Down from the stars'

'I am ready' Ruby says, and fastens her mouth to his. She cups his heavy balls with her hand, slides her fingers to the base of his long hard cock and pulls him back inside her. When she feels him shudder and pulse in the root of his sex, she draws them both down below the surface of the milt-white, wind-cut water.

The End.

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*Story challenges can be fun, and scary too. As I remember, this one came from a call for submissions for a cowboy erotica anthology. A few of us got talking about this and somebody said 'How about cowboy Cthulhu erotica?'*

*For some reason this stuck in my head, along with other thoughts, such as 'I don't know anything about cowboys,' and 'I've never written erotica'. It was that last which made me think hard about this, and decide to try my hand. The Deep One was the result.*

*I looked forwards to the critique workshop for this story with something approaching dread. You can write about serial-killers and nobody thinks anything of it. Write a sex scene and people seem to assume this is your personal bag.*

*I never submitted it to the cowboy erotica anthology, but it did find a home with fishnet.mag, whose acceptance letter was completely charming.*