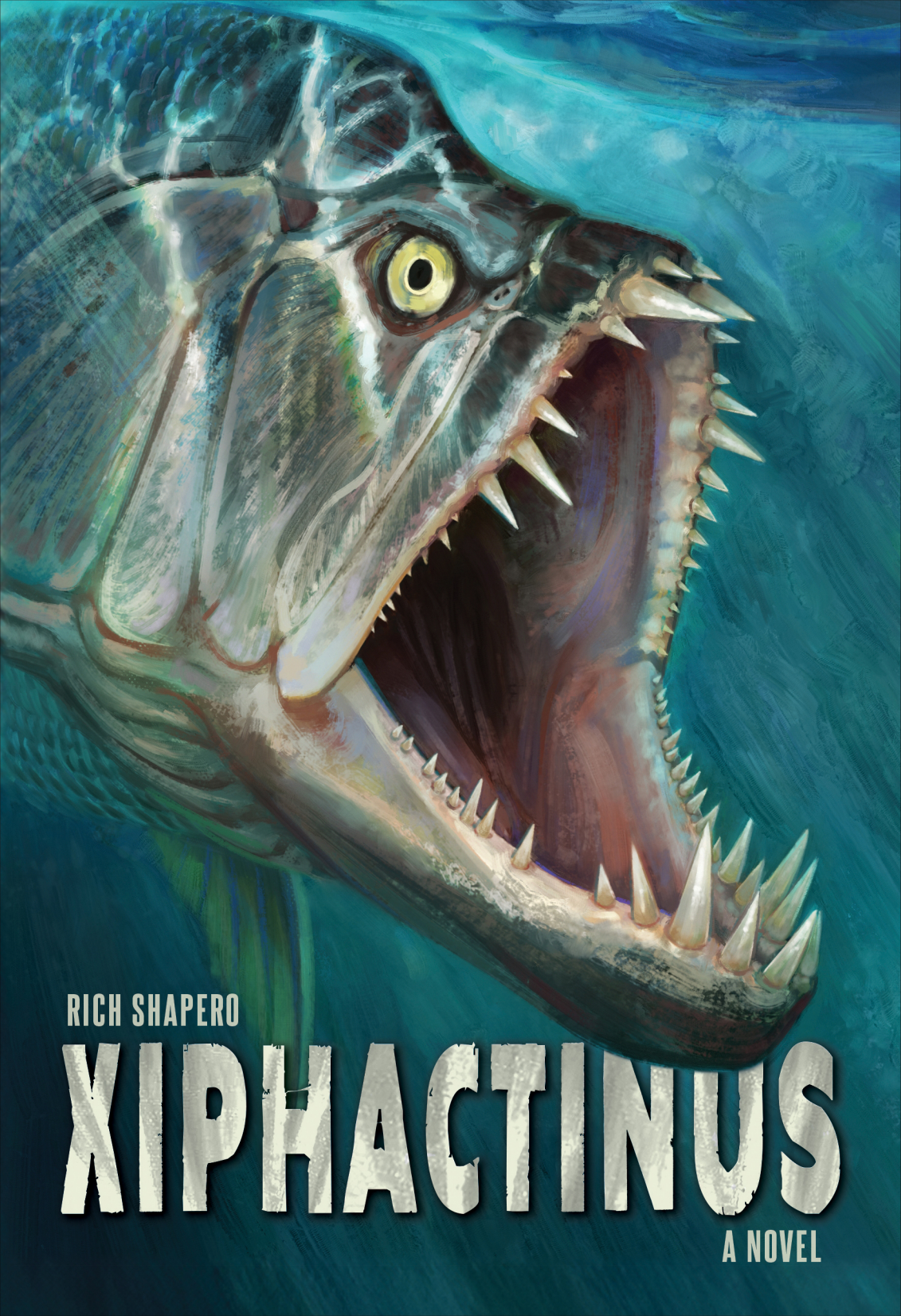




RICH SHAPERO

XIPHACTINUS

A NOVEL

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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

TooFar Media
500 Stone Pine Road, Box 3169
Half Moon Bay, CA 94019

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Too Far
Wild Animus

1



BASTARD SON

4ou never imagined the crooked currents of life would carry you into a maelstrom, a crisis whirling with danger and transformation.

But here you are.

As your guide in the practice of ruthlessness, I've been watchful. I've spurred your appetite and wrath. I've questioned your dread and curried your daring. I've cheered your moments of blood and brutality. But now that the crisis is here, I'm concerned. Despite all our time together, I fear you are unprepared.

The outcome seems very much in doubt. Will the challenges finish you, or will they kill the last vestige of simian scruple and set you free?

It's too late for shame, my boy. Too late for regret. Too late to change course.

There's no altering the identity that instinct and fate have given you. And—I say this with a big fish's scorn—*why would you try?*

Your erstwhile kin, your former brothers and sisters—those cowering fools covered with hair, huddled together,

sharing their hopes that the weakness of many will sum to the assurance of one— They would never believe what's happened to you.

Do they think they know a man named Dun? Do they imagine they speak to him on the phone or pass him on the street? It is Dun, isn't it?

Ha! Shall I try to remember the name your parents gave you? Was it Merrit or Angel or Harmon? A line of descent that means nothing now. From our first meeting, you were Dun, an abandoned child, an ex-human being—the bastard son of Xiphactinus.

I remember those days. Your connection to me was thin and needy. But I had no complaints. My patronage was pleasing to you. And it pleased me too. Humble times! The arrogant apes who dug me out of the chalk would be shocked to discover us now, alarmed that I'd mixed my nature with one of their own, amazed that we'd grown so close.

Now, in the depths we dwell in together—

In this grave pause, this moment of dark reflection—

A cloud of glimmering coccoliths enfolds us, sheltering our ruminations.

Your crisis, my son. How did we get here? What shall we do?

SELL AT THE MARKET

The sun hid behind the moon. The air turned cold, the dark clouds parted and money poured down. And when the daylight returned, our Interior Sea—until then a dusky vision that came and went—was a vivid green, a change more shocking, more real than you could have ever imagined.

Schooled by millennia, I was thoughtful, wary.

I knew what the riches meant. I knew the currents would bear tempting scents to others. Tides would shift and channels would open. Dangers would arrive from near and far. Monsters have no interest in minnows, but a big fish gets their attention. You would be threatened in ways you hadn't been threatened before. And quickly.

Dun, my boy—

You were so naïve, so unprepared for exorbitant wealth. Your mind was lost in the irony of it, that someone so impoverished by fate should be decked with public rewards. *Here I am*, you thought, and you did a fine job of dissembling. No one saw your bewilderment. But the two of us knew: it was a magic trick—that you'd found your way to such prominence, with your heedless nature and your unsettled past.

A venture capitalist! My dear boy. In the cockle bed of tech, Silicon Valley! Such stature, so stunningly new, so thoroughly *now*. You, with a prehistoric mind and a dubious soul! How could the fates let slip something like that?

To the invisible forces that rule the world, your equivocal history didn't matter. Well-meant misdeeds, lapses of conscience, blunders, betrayals and the countless dissimulations—

The maze had been twisted, but the clever fish passed through it. What agility! What finesse! As an investor, you flared your gills and finned boldly, and your bets were shrewd. You mimicked the best and tailed the fastest. Bringing companies to the public market took craft and calculation. Through it all, you viewed yourself as a lucky imposter. Who could believe the charade would play out?

Good times, such good times! I hung in the water behind you, watching as you read the confirmations from your controller at the end of the day. So many shares of this or that stock had been deposited in a brokerage account. Like a savory baculite served raw, arms twitching, on an inoceramid plate. His life is yours! Do as you please!

I enjoyed your disbelief. I chuffed with anticipation at the tasty dishes, working my jaws. I rattled my ray fins as you tallied the expected gains at your desk. I swam beside your speeding car. I listened to the mumbled words you shared with your wife and sons. I treaded beside you when you set your alarm at night, and I stirred myself with you at five the next morning before trading began in New York.

The gnawing suspense, the amazement, the stunning

simplicity of it all—

“Sell at the market,” you told the banker who answered the phone. And in an hour or two, you’d hear that the sale had been completed and the proceeds—millions of dollars—would be posted to your account.

Had any fish, large or small, ever fattened himself so easily?

Day after day, week after week, month after month—How long would the market hold out? When would the bubble burst? The money was turning a notional sea into the real thing, vast and green. And the freedom you’d dreamt of for so many years—

Fellow fish worried about persistence. Was high-speed comm and the internet real? Could the swarming companies live up to the wild hopes? Some feared for the newly employed. Some looked at the government windfall from taxes on gains and gave thanks. Not you, my boy. You had only one thought: sell at the market before things change!

You’d known privation and desperation, and the knowledge served you well.

And then—the unexpected.

Your boss, the fish who’d hired you, the venture firm’s founding partner— The balding, overly proper Prentiss— He wanted to speak to you.

THE NEXT FUND

Prentiss was playing the Oxford don. His manner was grave. As you entered his office, he adjusted his glasses and tapped his brow.

Had something been disclosed? The money was yours, wasn't it? No one could take it away.

You sat across from him, silent, matching his gravity. Prentiss made a few mundane remarks and then came to the crux. He had decided to retire, he said, and from the other partners, he'd picked you as the new leader.

You absorbed his words. You considered them carefully, blew a few bubbles and watched them rise. You nodded to show you understood.

He'd been talking to the fund's investors, your limited partners, he said. He'd discussed his retirement and a managed transition. The LPs were supportive. And with their support, he'd circled commitments for the next fund. It would be larger—much larger—than those before it. A billion clams, he said.

“Who's going to manage it?' they all asked.”

And he stared at you.

You counted. One-two-three. Then you laughed. “I will,” you said.

You left his office in a fog, as if a passing cimolichthys had blown milt in your face. A new span of control. More public visibility. How would your wife react? And the boys—

Your assistant, Diana, stepped toward you, tearing a page from her notepad. “Redfern wants you to call him,” she said, extending the page.

You laughed and waved the note aside.

Blithe. Jaunty. Thanking your unexplainable luck. You had no idea what the step-up meant. No idea of the threats that were aligning themselves—even then—against you. Despite years of tutelage, you were so naïve.

Your high spirits accompanied you home. Your wife was out, but your boys were upstairs with the nanny. You put one on each knee and bounced them, enjoying their twaddle as ape fathers do. Then you shared your good fortune. They were joyful.

Their notion of what you did was vague. They were aware that each fund you’d raised had invested in many companies. And they knew some of the company names: Gnogen, Soritec and the like. They understood how important Gnogen was: that you’d started the company, that it had been successful and the Gnogen people were all your friends.

You explained that, as a result of your triumphs, you were going to be the new leader of your partnership. They cheered the news and proposed ice cream to celebrate. After the foolery, you put them to bed.

LONG NECKS, SMALL HEADS

The timing seemed strange, unlikely. That's the life a big fish leads.

Were they paddling in a pack, following you, watching you, waiting for the right moment? Or had they been tracking you separately and found each other just before the attack? Pointless questions. Lawyers and suits are as native as algae to the Interior Sea.

Soritec's new product was late, and the announcement sent the stock price plunging. Their IPO had made a big splash the year before, and—foolish boy—you were still on the board. Soritec's general counsel called to alert you that suits were brewing. Plaintiff law firms were issuing press releases, soliciting clients. Injured parties were nursing their wounds.

When the suits came, you and your fund were named. How naïve you were! You imagined it was a coincidence that the legal assault should come shortly after the publicity around your new fund. Money draws monsters, my boy, in this case elasmosaurs—bloated and slow, but never sated, persistent creatures with long necks and small heads.

Eight suits were filed, and two months later the court

appointed the biggest elasmosaur to represent the class as lead plaintiff. You knew about class-action suits. You'd been through two, but never as lead investor.

"The big one," Prentiss said, "will get legal fees. The others, only damages. It will take some explaining." He was thinking of your investors. The explanation, he said, must come from you, as it was a company of yours that had drawn the suits.

The lead elasmosaur called. He wanted to depose you in front of the pack.

There in your conference room, in the filtered light of the deep, jellies and belemnites winking on either side, you faced your enemies—half a dozen of them. The lawyers were giants weighing half a ton, and the one in the lead was forty feet long.

Your eyes were steely, your fins wide, braced on the table.

The lead snaked his neck toward you, eyes like black stones, raising his front paddles. He tried a joke on you. You were silent, showing him only your emotionless eyes and your sealed lips. The monsters looked at each other, removed the portfolios from their attachés and the questioning began.

Initially they focused on the numbers miss. What had caused it? they asked, eyes gleaming. Engineering problems, you said. They requested documents—reports, schedules, emails. Soritec's general counsel noted the requests.

Would the new product ever ship? Yes, you replied. There had been some design challenges, but the project was progressing and had all the promise the CEO had described. More requests for documents.

The monsters press you: there were earlier signs the

product schedules were in jeopardy. “No,” you say, “there were not.” You and the board knew, they assert, that the product wouldn’t ship on schedule. “No,” you say, “no one knew.” You intentionally omitted this information from the IPO documents, they insist. “No,” you reply. “I did not.”

For monsters, their heads were small—two feet in length—but they all moved together now, six long necks crossing the conference table. When they stopped, the narrow heads were arrayed around you, needle teeth unmeshing like fingers.

The jaws remained parted while the lead spoke.

“You knowingly misled investors through false statements in your securities registration, didn’t you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” you replied.

The lead plaintiff used his front paddle to push a document across the table toward you. It’s a copy of Soritec’s IPO registration.

“Is this your signature?” the monster asked.

Bubbles rose from his nostrils. The gray mass of his trunk swayed, and as his words entered your ears, you could see a vortex of minnows whirling behind him—memories of the worlds of helpless creatures he had consumed.

“Yes,” you said, “that’s my signature.”

“You understood at the time,” he said, “that by signing the registration document, your fund is liable.”

“Yes,” you said, “I understood that.”

The lead waved his paddles like wings, and the others did likewise, acting out their passage from discovery to court and a visible public trial.

Then the lead's head moved closer and his eyes narrowed, looking for weakness, looking for fear.

"You understand," he said, "that you are personally liable."

A special threat, just for you.

"Yes," you answered, "I understand." You winced at his foul breath. "You had squid for lunch."

His neck rose, the gray folds unpleating as the tube arched over and down, jaws opening above your head. He shifted his nose without speaking, as if he meant to asphyxiate you, letting the light flash on his long teeth, as if each was an injured party he would represent.

"This is serious," he said, and his malodorous threat filled the room.

The conference table between you rippled like a lake, and the necks of the other attorneys extended together, crossing the table toward you. One of them began to groan, an expression of scorn, and the others joined in. The derision mounted around you, shaking the currents like a chorus of tubas.

They repulsed you, but the threats were real. Soritec had modest revenues and thin profits. The elasmosaurs' target was you and your fund.

"Expect additional document requests, interrogatories and more detailed depositions," the lead said.

The monsters' fore paddles rose together, gleeful at the prospect of devouring your time. The eyes of one narrowed with pleasure. A second nibbled its teeth. A third angled its head, as if chasing a turtle through jellies.

"Do what you like," you said. "You'll not get a snail from me."

In response, the followers wound their necks around the lead, and with a flurry of cartilage clicks, they presented a phalanx of faces, grinning with greed.

“We’re going to enjoy this,” the lead said.

NEVER DIGESTED

The evening of that same day, the disgorgement occurred. Your wife, the woman you call Kath, a distant, questionable creature— She wanted something. “We have to talk,” she’d said the week before. And again, “We have to talk.” As soon as the elasmosaur meeting ended, Diana passed you a message. “We’re going to talk,” Kath said. “Tonight.”

You felt ill. The elasmosaurs had rattled you. What was the trouble with Kath? You imagined her aiming her sharp nose at you, using the snippy speech she’d learned at the elite girls’ school back East. You stumbled through the parking lot, found your car and drove home. Were things about to unravel? Your marriage had flaws, but you depended on each other. Kath was fine, you assured yourself. But your guts were roiling.

You pulled into the garage and killed the engine. When you opened the car door, pain doubled you over. You were weak. So weak, dear boy. And aware of the risk. Very aware. Your radar was finely tuned to desertion.

“Kath?” You called her name, but there was no answer. “Kath!”

You reeled into the bedroom. “Kath.” You collapsed on the mattress, shaking, curling into a fetal ball. Fetal, oh yes. In your uncertainty, you were a mammal again—a helpless ape. You clenched and shook and cried out for your wife, and at the sound of your voice, she churned in your gut and rose up through your gullet.

A horrible moment. Your throat, impossibly stretched; your jaw hingeing wide; a great wrenching heave from your hips to your heart, and the sticky mass of that conjugal creature emerged from deep inside you, wings folded, her twisted body bloody and gleaming on the coverlet before you.

She was fully intact, fully alive, as sovereign as the day you’d swallowed her.

Kath’s lids parted. A mucid eye found you and rolled at your pain. Disdainful, short-tempered— Her toothless beak opened. She breathed and shifted her tongue. She flexed her leathery wings and drew herself up, crouching on all fours: a living, breathing avian reptile.

“Kath,” you murmured, “Kath, Kath—”

She’d been your prey long ago: a pteranodon that you’d swallowed whole. But it was suddenly clear: she’d never been digested.

You spoke her name again, but Kath didn’t reply.

She raised her claw, stretching the leathery skin between her ring finger and her damp body, unfolding her idled wings, testing, examining. Narrow wings. Wings designed for long-distance flights.

A screech rose in her throat, and her long bill parted.

"I'm tired of living inside you," she creaked, "subsisting on prey you've swallowed."

You were struck, but you shouldn't have been. She'd acted the hominid part for years, but the veneer had always been thin.

"We belong together," you said, a child's fears welling inside you.

Kath's eyes were opaque as pebbles.

"Our vows," you implored her, remembering the promises you'd made.

"My captivity is over," she said.

"Don't do this," you said. "Please, Kath. Crawl back in."

"Get away from me," she squawked.

You reached for her wrist, then stopped yourself, knowing her bones were hollow. A pterosaur with a broken wing would starve. In that moment of indecision, she jumped from the mattress onto the floor.

Did she care for you, Dun—ever, really? Her cheer was so often forced. She got what she wanted: her children have your genes. They're killers too, in their impish way. Nothing like you, of course; but they have enough feral instinct to give them an edge in a vicious world.

What need does Kath have for you now?

Her eye was red and glaring. You could feel her disdain. She swiveled around and strode on all fours to the bay window.

Kath had always been secretive, calculating and cold. She didn't care if you understood who she was. She didn't mind your oblivion, your ignorance, your self-absorption. She knew

that, for you, her unreachable core was part of her charm. It was a wonder the marriage had lasted as long as it had. It was the boys, of course, that kept her inside you.

You're a smart fish. You weren't really deluded. In a corner of your mind, the knowledge was there: you had married a woman who didn't need you and never would. It was her insularity that enabled your immersion in the fury of life—the hunt, the combat, the daily bloodshed. You imagined the neglect made no difference to her.

The winged reptile turned before the bay window. Kath opened her beak and explained, without a whisper of feeling, the conditions under which she was leaving. She'd retained an attorney and intended to take "everything."

"We need each other," you said, like a stricken innocent.

Kath's bill opened and a croak emerged, objecting or laughing hoarsely.

Then she turned and used the horny point of her beak to shatter the pane.

She leaped through the ragged hole, spread her wings wide, dipped for a moment, then caught a lifting breeze. Pitch, yaw, roll— Her arms kept the wing membranes taut. She rose in the afternoon heat, soaring over houses and roadways, and vanished through a break in the clouds.

ROHRIG



iphactinus cares nothing about his mates. He's had too many to count, all nameless and faceless. For a big fish, lust is a wrenching orgasm in open water, spraying your sperm at drifting eggs. The source is nowhere in sight.

I whispered this truth to you while you slept, but it was little comfort. Alone, tossing in the marital bed, sweating and half-delirious, dreaming of your vanished wife and the two boys she'd hidden away— How distressed you were.

The Monday after Kath's departure, at the weekly partners' meeting, you wore your polished front. You were crisp and composed. You shared the details of the elasmosaur visit and the class-action suit. The group had weathered similar attacks in years past, so the news didn't ruffle your partners. Prentiss explained that he'd announced the succession plan to your investors, and when the meeting was over, the two of you sat in his office and called a few to talk about the new fund.

Prentiss was loftily British. Despite your shaken state, you spoke with confidence, answering questions, assuring them of your long-term commitment. You trotted out the shifts in the investing focus you'd been considering. You seemed engaged,

and I enjoyed the show. Prentiss wrapped up, sharing the date and mechanics for closing the new fund. A billion dollars. Calm and cool. Business as usual.

When the calls were over, you shared the collapse of your marriage with Prentiss. You spoke as if it was in the past or had befallen someone less fortunate.

“These things happen,” he said, having been through two divorces himself.

That evening, and for a few days after, it seemed you’d survive.

Then, in the middle of this distraction, the ultimate threat appeared.

Your first view was blurred by distance, striped by wavering currents. But there was no mistaking the giant’s size and its sinuous form. A tylosaurus.

Xiphactinus is the length of three men, but I disappear in the giant’s shadow.

The tylosaur’s attention was on you.

Gnogen’s general counsel, Tanya, usually casual and droll, was formal in summoning you to a video conference. The CEO, George, would be on the call. “The SEC is investigating us,” Tanya said. “A man named Rohrig.”

Investigating? Unlike the fledgling Soritec, Gnogen was in command of its numbers. What was there to investigate?

At the call’s start, Tanya described events from six months before. Rohrig had approached her. He said the SEC had some suspicions. He wanted confidential access to three employees in the finance department. He insisted: no one in management

or on the board of directors must know.

You didn't like what you were hearing, but Tanya wasn't at fault. That's how creatures like Rohrig work.

She'd cooperated, Tanya explained. She made the three employees available to answer questions. While this was going on, she said, she'd done her own probing.

"I was looking for a false declaration in our financial reports."

Had someone in the bowels of the company done something wrong?

"Did you find anything?" you asked.

Tanya shook her head.

"Not even some small accounting errors?"

"From what I can tell," she replies, "we're perfectly clean. But—"

But what?

"Rohrig's convinced he has a case," Tanya says.

A case? What kind of case? Gnogen is a booming business and your biggest return. A glamour stock, and you were the lead investor. It's been public for years, and you're the Chairman. Your ego is all wrapped up in Gnogen. No danger in that, hmm?

"An Order of Investigation has been approved," Tanya explained. "That means Rohrig can compel testimony by issuing subpoenas."

George was silent. Had Tanya already reviewed this with him?

"You're at the top of his list," she tells you. "He's asked a lot

of questions about you. You in particular.”

At that, Tanya’s formality and George’s quiet began to make sense.

On Tuesday of the following week, she met you at the SEC offices in San Francisco.

The two of you were escorted into a room with rows of seats, and a single chair on a small dais. Beside the chair, a court recorder sat with her machine before her. She nodded and smiled, and a moment later the monster swam through the door.

Younger, in his late twenties. Suited in black. Ebony hair curled with gel, eyes gleaming. He had four minions with him, all of whom recognized you on sight.

“Rohrig,” the tylosaur said, extending his hand with a considering look, as if he was going to eat you and was imagining how you’d taste.

You clasped the cold appendage.

As light from the windows struck his face, you could see: his chin and jaws were mottled, stained with pale patches. Scarring, infection, or a submarine fungus. His nose was large and pointed. It didn’t protrude from his face; it deformed it, thrusting like the head of a spear.

Responding to your scrutiny, his face was split by a leer.

Beside you, Tanya quivered. Beneath her bangs, there was dread in her eyes. A simple ammonite, she was smelling the brine, feeling the tylosaur’s power with sensitive tentacles.

Rohrig motioned you to the chair on the dais.

How long had he been following you? His unflinching

calm, his killing look— This was no casual encounter, no probing for information. Rohrig had been stalking you, and now he was thrusting his long jaws into your world.

You settled yourself in the chair.

Rohrig sat across from you, aides on either side.

Death lurks for every creature in the Sea, but only a big fish like you gets the honor of a federal investigation.

Rohrig was holding a folder the color of blood. He opened it, scanned a list, then cleared his throat and spoke in a formal manner. He explained the investigation they'd launched, along with his suspicion. "Fraud," he said, and the corner of his mouth twitched, imagining the satisfaction he'd feel when he brought you down.

You were stunned, speechless.

Fraud? What fraud? Had you—inadvertently—done something wrong?

Still a set-upon child. Still half an ape, plagued by moral questions. *Let's not be foolish*, I warned. *Justice has nothing to do with this.*

As if he could hear me, Rohrig parted his lips and showed you his teeth.

Then the questions began. At first, he focused on Gnogen's financials. The aide at his elbow passed him reports and spreadsheets, which he handed to you. "I don't know," you replied, and "I can't say." Most of the paperwork you'd never seen. Then Rohrig turned to emails you'd sent or had been sent to you, and documents you'd signed that Gnogen had handed over. At every question you answered, Rohrig asked for related

documents and copies of messages. Tanya had her laptop open and was typing as fast as she could.

Was there a pretense of impartial treatment? Oh no. He meant you to see just how partial he was.

“Have your counsel explain,” Rohrig suggested, “the penalties for destroying documents.” And, while Tanya typed, he listed more things he wanted. Items related to Gnogen financials. And then—Your heart stopped: he asked for bank statements that disclosed your venture firm’s assets and the holdings of your funds.

A tylosaur, I had tried to explain, is a wild creature, born for the Sea. A predator, he lives to devour others. Rohrig’s interest in fraud was a guise. What he really wanted was to eat and grow larger. That would give him the recognition and attention he craved.

His next requests were still worse. Rohrig asked for records of your personal assets—property, bank accounts, trusts, stock holdings. He wanted a clear picture of your net worth.

You were sitting there, feeling peril and a hominid indignation. Moral indignation! A moment of weakness, and Rohrig could see it. He met your gaze in the silence, pleased, so pleased by the fear he’d inspired.

The man is an egomaniac masquerading as a crusader. An attorney, of course. He cares nothing about the public good.

“Fraud is a serious business,” Rohrig said. “Crimes like these end careers.”

And start them! It was through high-profile prosecutions that he was hoping to make his name.

“This new fund—” Rohrig spouted his lips as if he might whistle. “A billion dollars. What’s the closing date?”

And with those words, the picture resolved.

Gnogen wasn’t the target. You were a big fish now—large enough to be headline prey. And the spectacle of seeing you devoured would be a vicarious thrill for a threatened world.

Rohrig had slid from his chair and was circling in the water around you, using his powerful tail. He’s no “lie in wait” monster. He’s fast and aggressive, and he’s singled you out. His tongue tests the water between you, smelling and tasting. And there’s more than just hunger here, more than just craving. Rohrig is vengeful. He’s the despised brother of a favorite son. He’s a laggard whose teachers expected him to fail.

And then, seeing that threat, your presence returned. You turned a blind eye to his circlings. You straightened your back, stiffened your will.

If you want to fight, I’ll fight, you thought.

Rohrig could see you bristle. He used his fore limbs to brake.

He glared at you, black hide twitching. Then he opened his jaws and reeled off other threats: misrepresentations at the time of a merger, collusion, rigged strike prices for option grants. *Once I’ve got my teeth in you*, he was saying, *I won’t let go*.

You hardened yourself and glared back at the beast.

“Do whatever you’re going to do,” you dared him.

On the way down in the elevator, Tanya said she would talk to Rohrig’s staff and try to narrow his document requests.

You were barely listening. You parted ways in the parking garage. To avoid traffic, you stopped at a clam house in the city for dinner.

While you pried the shells and soaked the bread, you thought about powerful fish who had met a grim end. They felt like brothers now. One was found slumped at his desk, dead of a heart attack from a cocaine snort. Another was kidnapped from a company picnic and held for ransom. One got drunk at an IPO celebration and drove off a cliff.

I was silent. I watched. I kept my advice to myself. I accompanied you home, hovering in the den while you showered and climbed into bed. And then, when you'd fallen asleep, I drew close and spoke my piece.

For those who live in the Interior Sea, there are no rules. Or—if it's easier for the simian mind to grasp—there is only *one* rule: survival. You're alive or you're dead. It's as simple as that.

THE FANCY



enjoyed what followed—enjoyed it greatly!

The morning after your encounter with Rohrig, you acted so self-composed. I watched you shower and shave, tend to your teeth, lotion your body. Your choice of clothing was relaxed and muted—sand-colored jeans and a casual sweater, pastel lime.

The board meeting for a startup you'd recently funded—You couldn't have known in advance. You filed into the room with the others, sat and sipped at a water bottle while the team reviewed delivery dates and shared the news that they were impossibly late. Your explosion was a surprise, even to me. You raged at the team, threatening to cancel a milestone funding. When the technical founder tried to return to the board agenda, you tore it up; and when he sought help from others present, you climbed onto the boardroom table, screaming at him and stamping your feet, insisting you were going to replace him.

That afternoon, you called a handful of local firms to find a divorce attorney. Your wife had contacted all but one, which made them conflicted and unavailable. They too were the

recipients of your rage.

On your return home, you got a call from a co-investor, the jolly Redfern, which rankled you further. A dinner invitation, no doubt, for you and Kath. You deleted the message.

And then— A sleepless night and a waking fantasy in which you unleashed your fury and removed the tylosaur threat.

Was that murderous Fancy your sole creation or do I deserve some credit? It was, without doubt, the kind of aggression I would have suggested. Perhaps my presence declared itself subconsciously. Wherever the Fancy came from, the dawn didn't dispel it.

You rose and dressed. You called Diana and said you were sick, and you spent the rest of the day acting it out. Some research online. Then time in your car. A visit to a sporting goods store in San Jose to look at weapons that might be used. Return home, more research online. A drive to a county park with an archery range. Then, at the end of the day, a visit to SEC headquarters in San Francisco. You circled the block and pulled into the parking garage.

Were you serious? I thought you were.

But that evening, alone in the house, the Fancy faded. The situation, you thought, wasn't as dire as that. Your innocence would protect you. You weren't such a big fish after all. Rohrig would lose interest once he saw the specifics.

With these rationalizations, grief crept in. You missed your sons and you missed your wife. Despite her words and her hostile intentions, you imagined she was still inside you. How could you forget her? It was painful to watch: your weakness,

your regret. The anthropoid curse descended full force. Guilt, doubt, shame and self-pity. Three days of it!

What's happened to Dun? He's surrendered to sleep. Night fogs drift through the broken bay window. He rises from the bed in darkness, mind numb, feet shuffling, hands reaching out, seeing his silhouette in Kath's vanity mirror.

Desertion, divorce. A class-action suit and a federal investigation. Fraud, public disgrace. The end of strength and self-confidence—

Your simian mind had taken control. You were drowning in fear and remorse. All the persecutions that a conscience can muster—

I might have helped you. Xiphactinus has eyes that don't close, a will that never freezes, and a heart that can't be pierced by guilt. But instead of allowing me access, you barred me completely, surrendering your fate to your hominid forebears. Your linens were winding sheets. You were nothing but a snoring corpse. Sleep no more, I exhorted you. It's a curse, a weakness you can't afford—not with Rohrig circling.

Sleep no more! Keep the lights on, prop up your lids! Rage, fume, menace any who menace you! Hatred, blood-thirsty oaths, murdering maledictions— Restraint is for the castrated sons of apes!

Why are you rummaging in the dark, opening cupboards and pulling out drawers?

That object in your hand— What have you found?

A video with home movies your Uncle Luther recorded when you were a child.

Into the player it goes, and we're looking at— What?

Your first birthday.

Poor fellow. Why do you cling to this sorry reminder? Oh yes. It's the hominid way. The innocence of a child is guilt's most powerful tool.

The birthday boy looks blissful. His father is portering gifts, lighting the candle; his mother is caring and close, whispering in his ear. What is she saying? Uncle Luther and Aunt Helene are there, youthful and trim, along with other grownups, friends and relations. They're all enjoying themselves. It's a kind and welcoming world.

You were still young when the marriage crashed and the clans disengaged. As you watched, you wondered as you'd wondered before: did your unstable character arise from a blasted foundation?

Was your ruthlessness—the alienation that brought you and me together, the rage that might drive you to inhuman extremes— Was it all just a product of disappointment? Was your hostility born from loss, an anger that something good was taken away?

You poor fool, I thought. Will you never stop letting self-pity rule you? Is your passion for life as feeble as that?

THE BRIDGE

4ou returned from your feigned illness the following week, and you put on a decent show. To other eyes, things still looked fine. Returns from the fund were strong. The class-action suit didn't get much press, and no one but your partners knew about your wife's defection. For the world at large, your life was still charmed. Open a *Forbes* or search the net: there he is with his confident smile, slicked by lucre, gliding through currents in jeans and sunglasses.

There was no ignoring Rohrig's investigation, of course. You would have to tell Prentiss and your partners, and your investor group couldn't hear the news from another source. You had to explain, and quickly.

What a meeting that was: the worst of you both. When you sat down with Prentiss, he read your fear. And when you briefed him about the SEC investigation, the stalwart Brit seemed loose in his chair. He drew a deep breath and tipped his head. A moment of silence, then a sigh and troubled concern. An SEC action could change everything, he observed: your ascent to managing partner, the new fund, your future as an investor— "Everything," he said.

“I know,” you replied.

“It must be hard,” Prentiss said, “with what’s happened at home.”

Such empathy! Shall we shed a few tears?

His understanding, of course, did nothing to help. On the contrary. His concerns entered your dreams with Rohrig’s threats, and mixed with the undigested wrath of your soon-to-be ex and the gang of attorneys with small heads and long necks.

The night was a difficult one. You rise worn and unrested.

Without shaving or showering, you dress and step into the front room. You have your phone in your hand and you’re looking at messages. The first one is from the president of a software company you’d funded a couple of years before. The company is doing well; you’re pleased, and so is your fellow investor, Redfern. The president wants you to call him back.

He answers on the first ring.

“Bad news,” the president says. “You may hear from Redfern’s partners. He disappeared four days ago. No one knew where he was, including his wife.”

Redfern is a regular ape, grounded, connected—not someone who’d vanish without a word.

“Yesterday afternoon,” the president says, “they fished his body out of the Bay. He jumped off the Bridge.”

You’re speechless.

“Apparently,” the president adds, “he had mental problems. He’d had them for years, his wife says. ‘His pain was unbearable.’ Those were her words. I had no idea.”

“No idea,” you agree. Redfern’s eager camaraderie and his cheery outlook had been a false front.

“That’s it,” the president says. “That’s all.” And the call ends.

You stand there, thinking of Redfern, remembering the last message he’d left. You imagine him on the Bridge with his hands on the rail, looking down at the water. What if you’d returned his call at that very moment?

Young and credulous, short with cropped hair, Redfern was smart, but servile too. A junior partner at a larger fund, whenever he heard you’d written a check, he begged for a piece. Finally you agreed, knowing he’d follow your lead and do as you wished, whatever the circumstances. For your co-investment, he’d led the second round, and you’d supported his request for a seat on the board. The seat is vacant now.

I’m nothing like him, you think. He was a genial snail crawling along, eating algae and dragging his shell. But even as you see that picture, you know how uninformed it is. You had no idea who Redfern was, or how alike or different you were. Was his life more desperate than yours when he jumped? Were the forces aligned against him so insurmountable? And for you— Is the end in sight? Perhaps the deal is about to close, and in this darker investment, Redfern will lead and you will follow.

You phone Diana and cancel the morning’s meetings.

You get in your car and head north. Up Nineteenth, through Golden Gate Park and the MacArthur Tunnel. You leave the car in the city-side lot and head for the Bridge on foot.

Where the walkway starts, a sign is posted. *Crisis Counseling*, it says, and there's an emergency number.

On the Bridge, it's windy and cold. The tops of the towers are lost in fog, but the rust-colored span and the suspender cables are clear before you, and so is the sea far below. On your left, the cars rumble north. On your right: the orange guard rail and the fatal drop. Walkers and bicyclers pass. A squadron of helicopters skim the bay and slip under the span.

There's a crow's nest around the south tower. When you reach it you stop, approach the rail and look over. It's a long way down—a long, long way. The sea's surface is dimpled and pitted, furrowed with foam.

What was Redfern feeling when he looked down? Did he have second thoughts?

You imagine climbing over the rail, reaching the ledge, balancing the soles of your shoes on the orange girder. Had he dressed casually? Had he put on a tailored suit and a colorful tie? Had he descended feet down, arms dangling; or had he met his end like a martyr with his arms spread? Maybe he turned on the girder and tumbled backwards, blind to it all. Once he'd left the ledge, the choosing was over; but there was time enough for a thought or two before he broke the surface.

Maybe he'd perished on impact or shortly after. Maybe he'd remained conscious, drifting limp and broken in the freezing bay. A sailing couple may have spotted his body and used a boat hook to pull him closer. The lights had gone out by then. Or maybe he was still conscious as they towed him, bobbing and rolling, toward shore.

Dear boy— That's enough, isn't it?

Is there anything here that surprises you?

Suicide is surrender. Those without the will to sustain themselves deserve our contempt. Let them jump. Jump, I say! Put an end to your pitiful life. See if I care! Jump, already. Jump, jump!

For you, my son, the Sea isn't mortality. It's a remedy. A blessed return.

Oh I can see you here, climbing over the rail, looking down at the lacy chop, the threads of foam, the furrowing currents—thinking not of ending your life, but of saving it. You aim yourself and plunge like an arrow, diving headfirst, arms by your sides. Your lips swell, your jaw gapes, your brow is swept back. Your body's inflating, broader and longer, with silver sides, scaled and gilled.

You're a fish, a giant one, so much larger than any a human has snagged on a line. Larger, more powerful, more dangerous— And when you reach the water, you plunge with purpose and command. You're not dashed and destroyed. You're not putting an end to yourself. You're returning to your native element, sealing a transformation that's been in the making all your life.

It's dark down here and as lethal as Redfern imagined. For an ape, that is. Not for a fish from the late Cretaceous. You, my boy, have a home in the ruthless deep. In spirit, you've been down here with me for most of your life.

2



UNEXPECTED DIVERSION

4ou're awake to danger, and your resolve is strong. You call Redfern's widow and acquit yourself as a mournful friend. You call the one unconflicted divorce attorney and ask her to represent you. Then you phone your wife to ask if you can see your sons. She doesn't answer or ring you back.

After a huddle with Prentiss, you meet with your partners to explain the Gnogen situation. Prentiss will get the fund's attorneys in contact with Rohrig to negotiate his document requests. A video conference will be scheduled two weeks out to speak to your investors. "I'll cover closing details for the new fund," Prentiss says. "Dun will discuss the class-action suit and the threats from the SEC." Your partners are behind you, and you're thankful for that.

A guarded privacy rules, but you keep to your schedule. You're an investor in a Denver-based company, and three days after the partner huddle there's a meeting in the Mile High City.

At SFO, you board the flight.

As you enter the first class cabin, you see an old acquaintance seated by the window in the first row. She smiles with surprise and greets you warmly. You return the greeting and

sit beside her.

At a time when you were still learning to prey—stiffening your spine and dining on turtles—you'd been neighbors in Pacific Heights. You'd spent many hours together: dinner, weekends, time after work. You were attracted not by lust or romance, but by her acid wit and her wicked laugh.

Things are different now.

You're a big fish and so is she, and as the plane is taxiing to the runway, she launches into a detailed account of her triumphs, her strokes of good fortune, her public acclaim.

In the air, the flood of self-congratulation continues. You're feeling, amid your personal distress, the need for companionship. You're hoping you will once again get a glimpse of the woman you'd known. Patiently you wait for the vat of egotism to empty itself. But it's bottomless. When the plane skids onto the tarmac in Denver, the noxious stuff is still pouring out.

You're churning inside. Even I, who have been so intimate with your fragile ego for so many years— Even I am surprised.

You see, in her self-absorption, a personal attack. Is she blind to your successes, your achievements, your strokes of good fortune, and the profuse acclaim you've received for it all? Not a word has she said about any of that. It's as if your notable life has been wiped away all at once.

With the threats you're feeling, it's easy to imagine that obliteration and utter obscurity will, in fact, be your lot.

Giving you barely a word of goodbye, your erstwhile friend heads for the baggage claim area. You should be exiting the airport, finding a cab.

You're in Denver to attend a board meeting. Remember?

Why are you standing here, staring at the electronic postings, looking for the next flight to Kansas City?

It's been many years since you visited the place of your birth. And now, through a stroke of chance, you're ninety minutes away.

What do you imagine you'll do there?

You have no siblings. Your father died years ago. Is this about your mother? She's in failing health, tended by your Aunt Helene in Overland Park, a KC suburb.

You find your way to the ticket counter and purchase a seat.

WELCOME HOME

While you're en route, Diana cancels your appearance in Denver, explaining to the CEO that there's a family emergency. She books a rental car at the KC airport. You land before noon, pick up the car and head south on Highway 435.

Aunt Helene and your mother are thirty minutes away.

You haven't spoken to either in years. Your mother would be older, much older. Despite being six years junior, she was feebler than her sister. And disconnected.

A strange woman. Your mother danced as a teen, and an accident left her leaning on a cane. When your father disappeared, she took to wearing a navy cape and a matching beret. *Mon dieu!* The poor creature thought she was French!

She committed a few couplets to memory and recited them again and again:

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure,

Les jours s'en vont je demeure.

The dregs of mothering were consumed by the *femme merveilleuse*.

Are we going to Overland Park to see her? It seems

not. You're turning onto Highway 70, headed west toward Lawrence. Where you came into the world. Of course. It isn't the living you're here to see. You've come for the memories.

An hour on an empty freeway, driving in silence.

Then we're crossing the Kaw.

Lawrence. Dear Lawrence. Nearly forty years have passed. You weren't happy here. You're not glad to be back. You're shuddering with apprehension.

Stately houses appear on the right, where big fish lived in an earlier era, before you were born. Traffic is light, and the streets are one-way. As the blocks go by, the dwelling size shrinks. Over the rooftops and through the trees, the walls of university buildings appear. Modest homes on either side, one and two stories, Phi Delta Theta, Sigma Phi Ep, shabby apartments, homes less kempt.

At the stop sign, you turn and enter an enclave called University Place, a modest neighborhood where faculty lived when you were a child. A right, two blocks, and we're on your street.

Slowing, creeping forward. Roll down the window.

It's warm, in the 80s, as it usually is in September. The sweetgum trees are taller now, and the crowns cast a deeper shade. But the lawns are the same—dormant, parched, more straw than green and infrequently mowed. They will stay that way through the winter.

You look in the rearview mirror. Pull to the curb. Switch off the engine.

The street's as quiet as it was decades ago. Quiet and lifeless. No one's outside talking or tending to something. No one

is painting a stoop or raking the leaves. The residents come and go through the alleys behind.

A moment to calm yourself, then you take a breath and step out. You're three doors from the family home. Oh I haven't forgotten. Your life began there.

Are the memories so threatening? You're on the sidewalk, stepping softly, as if there are demons your presence might wake. How many times did you tramp this concrete? How many sweetgum balls did you crush with your sole?

The house is like those on either side. It follows the four-square plan—four rooms below and four above, with a porch spanning the front. It's still gray-green. Your bedroom is still upstairs on the right, with its window overlooking the street.

You're alone with your awe. The dwelling means nothing to me.

As for your parents— The house meant little to either. You were born there because your father taught at KU, but he had no attachment to the college or town. He was raised and schooled in an eastern state. Your mother was from Kansas, but she had no affection for Lawrence. She dreamt of romance and an enchanted life.

But perhaps I was mistaken. It's not the foursquare that's on your mind. You're thinking of your real home. And your protector, your guardian—

Is that why we're here? It's just a short walk, and you know the way. So well, so well— You could do it blindfolded, my boy. And the old fossil will sense you coming. Oh yes. For him there is no forgetting.

Leave the car where it is. Turn your back to the gray-green house and follow the sidewalk beneath the trees. It's two blocks to the end of the street.

The *Dead End* sign is still there. The batten fence has weathered, but the opening is right where it was. And the dark magnolia is still standing beside it.

Through the opening, a concrete walkway appears. There was only a footpath decades before. Other than that, nothing has changed. The concrete becomes a stair rising in switch-backs between grass and sumac, then the climb levels off and you're on the KU campus, passing between Blake Hall and Twente, skirting the roundabout. Alongside Fraser Hall, then the way descends.

Through crossed branches and leaf sprays, the tower appears. Seven stories of limestone with a terracotta steeple. The Natural History Museum.

You stop, gazing at it, feeling the old calm. Gratitude. Relief.

In your memories, the edifice stood on hallowed ground—a place where a divine spirit had risen, or where a suffering saint had died. High on the wall, an injunction is carved on a large span: *Cope*. And the advice is as right today as it was back then. "I'm trying," you murmur.

Yes, my son. You truly are.

Welcome home.

THE FOSSIL DOWNSTAIRS

The arched entrance is intricately carved. Above the double doors: the large half-rosette of leaded glass. As you mount the steps, you reach for the copper banister and it burns your palm.

You're back, my boy. Grip the handle and push.

The painted tiles are beneath your feet. It's cooler here. Remember?

There's a kiosk now where a student collects admission. You pay and step toward the stairwell, descending into it. Two flights down, the dark-boned hadrosaur is standing guard. You pass him and enter the Marine Hall.

A sharp odor, the cool flow of air, the blue-hued fluorescents—

Nothing has changed.

Most of Kansas was once underwater, and in these corridors that past is preserved: the Interior Sea and the creatures that lived in its depths.

A right turn at the glassed-in case, past the large *Platecarpus* fossil and a *Cretoxyrhina*, added since you were last here. *Gillicus*, *Apsopelix*, *Protosphyraena*— The bones of Sea dwellers

are all around you. Ancient, dead, turned to stone.

They ruled the world before you were born. Creatures as senseless as the chalk in which they were found. Except for one.

One of the monsters knows you.

Another right turn. The long case covers the wall, just as it did decades ago.

And behind the glass—

Nothing has changed, nothing at all.

I'm here, brightly lit, bony eye glaring, ray fin reaching as if it will pierce the pane and touch the boy staring at me across the millennia. Hundreds, thousands, millions of years— Separated by so much time, and so very little.

Your protector, your giant— I've been your freedom. At my age, I'm not looking for credit; but the notice belongs to me.

A fossil fish the length of three men, with an underslung jaw and spikes for teeth. Watching apes pass through the dimness. Watching them as they're watching me.

Two steps back. Take two, my boy, as you so often did.

The hooked crest crowning my skull. The giant plates covering my gills. The spines bristling along my back. My massive trunk. My powerful tail. Of all the monsters, I was the fastest. The museum has lit me like an icon, giving me the presence I earned in life and rightly deserve. Those who watch from the shadows guess at my cruel nature, my violent ways. Only to you has the secret life of *Xiphactinus* been revealed.

Now closer, closer.

Face to face again. Eye to eye.

You're taller now. You don't have to stand on your toes to see my spikes, to feel my scowl, to peer into the depths of my sclerotic eye. Black as ever. Black with hunger, black with rage, black with contempt. The vacuum, my son, that sucks and restores.

Oh yes—

My visage is more than a memory. More than a postcard from home.

I'm your mirror. Your reflection, then and now.

Not the image you see when you're fresh from sleep. Not the observer who watches as you scrub your ape's face, curry your hair or scour your nubby teeth. I'm a deeper reflection, one that's hidden from public view but never forgotten.

"He came from the Smoky Hills," a voice says.

A woman is standing three feet away, regarding us both. She has platinum hair, long and bound at the rear, rising like an off-center whale spout.

Your nod is perfunctory. "A long time ago."

"We're still bringing them out."

She has silver-blue eyes. She's wiry and muscled, and the points of her breasts nib her shirt. Her jeans are worn and powdered with dust.

"You're a paleontologist," you say.

"I'm a fossil hunter. I dig." She lifts her chin. "Xiphactinus aren't hard to find."

"There can't be many like him."

"He's your pal?" Her smile's uneven. An incisor is chipped.

All that remains is a white triangle. And there's a knot on the bridge of her nose. Broken and left unsplinted.

"When I was a boy, I came here often."

"You live in Lawrence?"

Her manner's abrupt, but she lacks the social grace to care.

"Not anymore. I flew in this morning."

Her hand's on your bicep, gripping. There's something wrong with her. She's less an ape than a pocket rat with an intruding gleam in her eye.

"I'm at a crossroads," you say. "He's my counselor. My closest friend."

She laughs. Then she sees you're serious.

"You work here?"

"No," she says. "I give them a fossil now and then. I spend my time in the chalk. What makes him so special?"

You meet the silver-blue eyes.

"His freedom," you say.

"Freedom's not hard."

"The Sea he swam in is gone."

She shakes her head. "Not really. I'm Petra," she says, extending her hand.

You regard it, then take it. Her fingers are calloused.

"I'm working with Dick downstairs," she says. "He's cleaning up something I found." Her hand goes into her pocket and emerges with a pen.

She raises the pen to her mouth and removes the cap, biting it with her broken tooth. Then she grabs your wrist and writes her number on your palm.

“Call me,” she says.

As Petra steps away, a message arrives on your phone. It’s from your divorce attorney. “Your wife’s counsel is asking for information about your financial assets.”

Let her wait.

You peer through the glass, nod at me and head toward the stairwell.

On the main floor you notice a change in the museum foyer. A giant fossil hangs in midair over the entrance. A tylosaur.

Wary, thinking of Rohrig, you take the stair to the balcony above and scan the monster. It’s forty feet long with yawning jaws, waving paddles and a coiling tail. The half-rosette window is directly behind it, and the declining sun has stained the glass red.

Another message arrives. It’s George, the Gnogen CEO.

You place the call and he answers on the second ring.

George has discovered what triggered Rohrig’s suspicions. A disgruntled ex-employee, a controller, played whistleblower. “He knows you demanded his termination,” George says. “He was doing a rotten job—we have plenty of evidence—and there’s a good explanation for the numbers he’s questioning. But he’s cooked up a story about how it was rigged by you and me to fool investors. An accountant resigned to go with him and he’s enlisted her in the lie.”

Your eyes are tracking the tylosaur’s winding spine.

“You’d think the government would be sane about this,” you say.

“For some reason,” George says, “this fellow Rohrig has it in for us. You especially. He told Tanya and me, ‘Your chairman is an arrogant crook.’”

The monster wants blood, my boy. Your blood.

When the call ends, you retrace your steps, thoughts dark, heading back to your car. You pass Fraser, the high point in Lawrence, and as you descend the walkway between Blake and Twente, the view opens up. You’d seen it many times as a youth. The landscape of Kansas, level and green, as green as the ancient sea. The museum was behind you. You’d left my protection. There was danger below, and you were plunging back into it.

A LIGHT SLEEPER

here's an ache in your side and your stomach is churning. The mattress in the hotel room is soft as silt, and if you fall asleep, you will sink like the dead and never come up. Your thoughts are sputtering neon—disconnected, missing words—but the flashing won't stop.

It was always this way. That's who you are.

Don't imagine you were like other apes in the crib. You were not.

You were weak, of course. You couldn't fin or glide on your own like an infant fish. You curled on the pad, messing your diapers. What a miserable lot life handed you!

But the wakefulness wasn't a flaw. It was a sign of distinction. For an eye as keen as mine, your character was already in view. Careful scrutiny revealed the qualities that you and I share.

It is late at night. Your nominal parents are sleeping, and the door of your room is open. I glide down the hall and nose through the gap, puffing my gills, smelling your breath, back-finning to slow.

You aren't curled and quiet in your crib.

Oh no. You're very much awake.

I fin closer to the wooden cage. Your head is up, but you seem unaware of my approach. You're looking through me.

Closer and closer, till my lips touch the bars. My eyes are just inches from yours.

And now, now I can see and feel your state.

Your infant body is tense, your expression stiff. You raise your arms. Your hands grip the posts. It's not my presence. I haven't triggered this disquiet. As close as I am, you seem not to see me or know I'm there.

Your legs flex beneath you as if something urgent demands your attention, as if some action has to be taken. In your restlessness, there's an innate hostility—a raging at fate that you could be so confined, that your desperate needs must be delayed, that your gnawing desires will have to wait.

Was I surprised? Not in the least.

Xiphactinus understood. For some, there's an imperative before there's a goal. That little simian was born with the knowledge that there were things to do—urgent things, desperate things—without having any idea what they were.

You were not like other ape infants. You weren't destined for a slow crawl to the grave. It was more than luck or cruel circumstance that turned you in my direction.

You were blessed by fate.

You wake before dawn, bleary, unrested. You are urinating when you notice the number written on your palm. You text Petra, and she texts back. A light sleeper too.

THE BITER

here's a place Petra has suggested on Mass Street. It's a bike shop and an eatery too. You meet her for coffee. She's sitting across from you now, stirring cream into her mug.

"No relatives?" she says.

You shake your head.

"Old classmates? Friends?"

"Not that I'd want to talk to."

"So you're here for—" Petra lifts her brows.

"Memories. Just memories."

"Well then," she says, "what's the first?"

"The first?"

"Memory," she says. "I'm trying to help you."

Your very first memory is a troubling one. Are you going to share it?

"It's unpleasant," you say.

"Go on." She combs her lower lip with her teeth and you see the wedge-shaped incisor.

"I was a toddler. I could walk, with an unsteady gait. I did goofy things. I rolled my eyes and stuck out my tongue. My father didn't have the patience for that. Who wants a clown

for a son?"

"That's the memory?" Petra says.

"I'm getting to it."

You're reluctant, of course.

"I was starting to talk," you say. Then your voice fades and your mind wanders into the past. A child feeling his weakness, badly distressed. You sought shelter in your mother's embrace. The mammal way: living with weakness, depending on others. You hated your quailing heart, but you couldn't surmount or forswear it. You learned, instead, to live with humiliation. Someday you'd be less reliant, someday you'd have the strength and the will. Before our first meeting, before my image swam into your brain, you were dreaming of a life like mine. A life of freedom and power.

And blindly, instinctively, you toyed with violence.

"Well?" Petra's impatient.

"They called me 'The Biter.'"

She squints, unsure what you're saying.

"I bit my playmates," you explain.

A prodigy! The first inklings of a predator's wrath. Mothers sighed and tended their charges. Some masked their contempt. All disapproved.

Petra is laughing.

You smile, pleased by her dismissal. But you remember the scorn in your father's eyes and the regret in your mother's. The rejections pierced you, but you didn't stop. You left bruises and teethmarks on other children—the younger at first, and then as your courage grew, the older as well.

In your heart, you know: the castigation was earned.

When you broke the skin, when you tasted blood, an instinct was brewing. You were only a short leap from imagining your lips and chin were slathered with it, imagining your jaws were deep in the flesh—the warm flesh, the quivering muscle, the squirming entrails—of a creature whose life now belonged to you.

“They couldn’t stop me,” you say.

Are you going to try to explain the mixture of anger and odium you felt? It was as if you were daring your own sense of shame, abusing yourself with the sharp tools of guilt. Like a spastic boy holding a razor, you couldn’t help slashing yourself, laying yourself open.

“In the bites I gave others,” you confess, “I felt my own misery and degradation.”

Petra is enjoying herself. “That’s ridiculous,” she says, flaring her eyes and cocking her head.

Her amusement is kindly, and in it you find some relief.

On the way out of the shop, you ask her what she’s doing that day.

“Working with Dick. He’s prepping out a piece of the fossil I found.” And then, to explain herself, “I get very excited when I find something big.”

On the sidewalk, she turns.

“If you promise not to bite me,” she says, “I’ll tell you a secret: I’m writing a book. *Conscience in the Age of Reptiles*.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Yes,” she grins, “that was a joke.”

AQUARIUM

Progress on the fossil?" you ask.

"Lots. A segment of spine and three ribs. Dick is the best. How about you?"

"I spent the day on the phone with attorneys."

Petra frowns.

"Business problems," you explain. "And a lot of back-and-forth with the woman who's handling my divorce."

Petra opens her menu.

The spout of hair is different. It's clean and on-center.

You're in a restaurant that was once a tram depot for the Kaw Valley Line. The server appears and Petra orders a burger. You choose black cod, but the server says they're out of cod. "Are the shrimp shelled?" you ask. No, she replies. If you order the shrimp, you'll have to shell them yourself.

"I'll have a burger too," you say, and when the server leaves, "Things are often not as we wish. You want another memory?"

"Please," Petra nods.

"For my sixth birthday, my parents gave me an aquarium. A glass tank, an aerator, rocks and plastic plants. And fish of various kinds and colors. Five of them."

“You’re still biting your playmates?”

“No, I’ve reformed. I faced my transgressions and embraced the civilized life. I’m trying to be a model child, and I’m not doing badly. I was excited about the aquarium.

“We moved a table into my bedroom and set the aquarium on it. My father helped me fill it with water. Once I’d put the rocks and plants where I wanted them, he mounted the aerator and I freed the fish from their plastic bags.

“They explored their new home, gliding along the walls, touching the gravel, poking their noses into corners, heedless of each other and the face watching them through the glass.

“My captivation charmed my mother. Father shared my curiosity.

“The three of us, stooped and pointing, followed the glittering creatures. The fish had no time for confusion or dread. There was exploring to do.

“Don’t forget to feed them,’ Mother said.

“‘You’ll need to clean out the tank once a week,’ Father explained. ‘Watch the thermometer.’

“‘Put a towel over them,’ Mother suggested, ‘so they can sleep.’

“The first week was very busy. Then things settled in for me and my fish. I enjoyed their antics, and I did my best to care for them.

“All was well until one morning a month or two later. When I pulled the towel aside, there was only one fish in the tank. I studied him, watching him cruise between the rocks, taking turns around the plants, commanding the tank—a

bigger fish now, but alone.

“‘Why?’ I thought, and I discussed what had happened with my parents. ‘There was room in the tank,’ I pointed out, ‘and there was food for them all. Why did he eat the others?’

“‘He was the bad one,’ Mother said.

“‘My father disagreed. ‘He objected to the others’ existence.’

“Neither were right, I thought. Fish aren’t good or bad, and they don’t act on opinions.”

At six, you hadn’t yet seen my vacuous eye or felt my scorn; but my spirit was stirring at the back of your mind. For the lone survivor in your tank, there was only one question: why would he eat pellets when there was live food swimming past his nose?

Before restaurants and groceries, before kitchens and cooks, eating was more than a break in the day. Devouring others was the center of life. No one’s at fault. There’s no one to blame. Violence is survival.

Petra puts her finger below the tail of her eye. There’s a pit in her cheek.

“A hen on our farm,” she says, “had four chicks. They were following her over a drainpipe. The last one was struggling, so I picked it up to carry it across. The hen tried to claw my eye out.”

“She didn’t care what your motives were,” you say. “Was the farm in Kansas?”

Petra squints and wrinkles her nose. Your question’s a simple one, but she acts as if she doesn’t understand it.

A CROSSCUT SAW



fter dinner, you walk to South Park together.

You take Petra's hand and say, "I want to know more about you."

Her brow eaves. The silence draws out.

"You're from Kansas?"

"Indiana."

"Tell me about your childhood," you say.

She shakes her head slowly.

"Please," you say.

Petra licks her lips. "I lost my mother. She died giving birth to me."

"You grew up with your father?"

She's unwilling to answer.

"What is it?" you ask.

"My past doesn't matter."

She speaks as if she'd rather not have one. Maybe, my boy, you should follow her example. If the backward view is a dole of pain and weakness, why look? What is there about your family that's worth remembering?

"What happened in the nice little home?" Petra asks.

Now it's you who are reserved. Silent, unsure.

Petra squeezes your hand.

"Things fell apart. Easy conversation vanished. They quibbled. They fought. The tension was omnipresent. My mother retreated into a private world."

She avoided your gaze. She spoke to herself. She'd sit in a chair and read, or stare at the air. What was she thinking?

"My father had a critical side, and it took him over. He was angry all the time."

And dejected. He sought relief outside your home.

"There were showdowns. Suspicions and accusations—He swore at her, she snarled and shook her cane."

Red faces and threats, curses and slamming doors.

"I began to wish I had a different father. One who was confident and self-aware. One without a hair-trigger temper. And a different mother. One who was always present. A soft-hearted woman with a hopeful outlook. Someone like Mrs. Sydon, my third grade teacher. The soul of kindness. When she led the class in song, she was a herald opening the gates to a better world.

"Mother's rages frightened me. She was convinced my father was seeing another woman. He tried to quiet her protests, then he stopped trying. I'd wake up in the morning and he'd be gone."

Go on. Wallow in self-pity. Tell her.

"One night I was awakened by a loud rasping. I sat up in bed, fearful, wondering what the sound was. I stood and it grew louder. When I opened my door and stepped into the

hall, I could hear them in their bedroom. She was reviling him, and he was sobbing. The sobbing was like the sound of a crosscut saw.

“The saw was cutting through everything. Ripping them both to pieces. Destroying the house. Hacking at my chest, tearing me open.”

You’re no longer walking. You’re standing in the grass beneath a tree, and Petra is gazing at you, listening. Does she understand? I think she does.

The saw was dividing you. Separating the part of you that longed for humanity from a wild creature that wandered the Sea.

“I’m going to visit my grade school tomorrow,” you say. “Will you come along?”

THE GOLDEN RULE

The morning is sunny, and it's not a long walk. You pass through the hotel lobby and head down the boulevard. A dozen blocks brings you to the grade school, a low single-story brick structure with horizontal windows. Petra is standing by a pin oak near the curb.

The school's entry seems to have shrunk. When you were young, it was large and forbidding. Over the double doors, the motto remains: "Beyond Lies Wisdom."

"Thanks," you say. And you clasp Petra's hand.

She receives the gesture warmly, in silence. Curious, observant. Almost demure.

It's Saturday, so the classrooms are empty. You skirt the threshold and start across the playground. As you move, you hear distant shouts. Ghosts on the wind, rising from the earth. An arresting gust, like a classmate calling your name. The parched grass seems like a grown-over boneyard.

On the far side of the playground, there's a low-roofed building. You point, then you're leading Petra toward it.

"I'm there, in that room," you say. "We're in a circle, kneeling on the floor. It's third grade, and I'm listening to

Mrs. Sydon.”

Today she’s explaining why violence is wrong.

“‘Do unto others,’” you quote her to Petra, “‘as you would have them do unto you.’ I loved Mrs. Sydon like everyone else. But her guidance troubled me. Why was she telling me to put others’ needs on par with my own? I had to look out for myself. Didn’t I?”

“You spoke up?” Petra asks. “You voiced your concern?”

“Not at first. Cooperation is necessary, I told myself. I remembered the greedy fish in my aquarium.”

“But then you thought better,” she guesses.

“Yes, I thought better. Caring about others when it might harm you— That was crazy. No intelligent creature would do something like that.”

Petra nods.

“Only someone,” you say, “ignorant of the design of our world could speak like Mrs. Sydon. Care for others can’t outweigh care for yourself. ‘Do unto others what will insure your flourishing.’ That’s the golden rule.”

“You explained this to the class?” Petra asks.

You laugh, and Petra laughs with you.

“I did,” you say. “I rose from the circle and declared to them all that Mrs. Sydon’s ideas were nonsense. I explained the motivation for her Rule: that it served the social needs of the human race to persuade its young that altruism, servility and selflessness were paramount virtues. And I identified the foundational lie: that we were born with the will to do good to others.”

“Poor Mrs. Sydon,” Petra says. “What did she do?”

“She didn’t appreciate having her Rule portrayed as a cod-dling deception. She berated me in front of the class. Nothing stirs the weak to viciousness more than the exposure of their fantasies.”

“She knew about Darwin,” Petra guesses.

“No doubt. But she wasn’t going to surrender her illusions to him.”

Petra finds all of this amusing. I do not.

I was there, my boy. I could hear your half-formed questions. I could feel your troubled thoughts. That classroom ape— He’s not sure who he is.

He’s not the one you’d be crazy to trust.

He’s not the one who knows no attachment and is loyal to none. Not yet.

He’s not the one who will poison the wine and murder the priest.

Xiphactinus knows him. I know he was born in the deep, the place they call hell. I know that the self is enough! And I know, before long, that will be his faith—one so simple that scripture is pointless. But the boy doesn’t know himself. Not yet.

The remembrance is complete—the part you’ve shared with Petra, and the part that is still a secret. You clasp her hand again, and the two of you start back across the schoolyard.

THROUGH THE LONG CANALS

Petra invites you for a walk by the Kaw. It's dusk and the littoral's covered with shrubs. The river is close, and the susurrus swells and subsides as the pathway turns, drowning and buoying your words. She's in her worn jeans, but her top is sleeveless and backless, more a bib than a shirt. Her pointed breasts jog as she moves.

"Men fall in love with me," Petra says.

That sounds like an invitation. She's learned some things about you, but she's taking a lot for granted. Where are her fears, her reservations?

"I like men who break the rules," she says.

"I'm older than you."

"I like older men," Petra says. "Married men too."

"You'd be okay if I was still with my wife?"

"If you're not fucking her, why should I care if she's washing your socks."

You don't reply. The pathway bends.

"I can be on my own," Petra says. "I'm not afraid of that."

"What happened to your tooth?"

"A fat girl hit me with a brick. When I was younger, I

got into fights.” She pulls on her earlobe, revealing a scar. “A guy tore out my earring. And a wild dog bit my breast. You’re talking to Petra’s remains. I’m a fossil.”

“So am I. But you know that.”

Silence.

“These past few days,” you say. “Together—”

Her steps have slowed. She’s listening.

“It means a lot to me,” you say. “That I’m not a puzzle to you. That you understand. So far, at least.”

Did she sigh? She’s still moving forward, looking ahead, following the path. It’s darkening, and you’re nearer the Kaw. The current is rushing.

“I had a fantasy,” you tell her, “when I was a boy. The kids played marbles at recess in the sandlot between the school latrines. The boys’ latrines were dark and mysterious, covered with emerald tiles; and we heard the girls’ latrines were the same. I imagined their toilets were portholes the girls could dive into. By swimming through the plumbing, they were able to reach the Sea we’d learned about in third grade. The great Interior Sea that once covered Kansas.

“There, all the mysteries—the secrets a boy yearned to know—would be revealed.”

The precious dream. Oh yes. I was your escort: the fantastical fish that lurked by your bed, waiting for you to fall asleep. I knew how, through devious means, you could get access to the girls’ latrines. I knew how you could remove your clothing, dive into a porthole and enter the plumbing. And if I so chose, if I was partial to you, I could guide your passage

through the long canals till you reached the warm and limitless Sea, with all its forbidden raptures.

There, among the swarming ammonites, the darting belemnites, the waving crinoids and clouds of jellies, you would find yourself with the girls you desired.

Petra stops. "Dun," she whispers.

You turn on the path and face her. You lower your face to hers and lick her lips; then you're passing through them, feeling her chipped tooth with your tongue.

"You know how," she asks, "Xiphactinus reproduced?"

"Without contact," you say.

"That's right. Like tarpon. They were broadcast spawners. A woman released her eggs in open water, and the man shot sperm at them."

"There was pleasure in that?" you wonder.

"It was ecstatic. A shocking chemical reward, a storm of the nerves. Why else would he do it?"

"Better than what a man feels," you say.

"There's nothing like it."

The rushing river is in your ears. You slide your hand down her thigh.

"You're gritty," you whisper.

"I'm oily inside," she says. "Do you want to have sex with me?"

"Badly," you reply.

"You should know," she says, "we have something in common."

"What's that?"

"I'm a biter too."

THE BOY DOWN THE BLOCK

That night Petra slept in your hotel room, and on waking you were like criminals who'd gotten away with a crime. Bite marks patterned your shoulder, and there were suck spots across your thighs. You remained in bed, and again Petra used her body to restore your fragile ego.

Around noon, you leave for Mass Street and lunch at a restaurant that was once a bank. It has the bank's tiled floor and barred windows. Petra jokes about robbing the place. The server comes, takes your order and goes.

"I'm going to be honest," Petra says.

She's preparing you for a negative observation.

"In the memories of yourself as a kid," she says, "sometimes I hear acceptance. Resignation. Amusement. But sometimes you speak with dread. As if you're still frightened by what happened here."

"There are things that I don't understand. That trouble me."

"You look worried," she says.

And you are.

Where do I cross the line? you wonder. So far, there hasn't

been any line, but— How much more are you going to confide? There are things about you she may not swallow. Things she may find repellent.

“There are stories,” you say, “that are harder to share.”

She squints as if she’s bracing herself.

“Alright,” you sigh.

“I was eight. I had a classmate named Ranes. He was a bully. Not a typical one. He didn’t lord it over others publicly. He was lean and skulking—a swarthy kid with a squarish head and a jaw that was always grinding.

“Ranes was quiet, but when he spoke, his voice was low and full of threat. There was an engine of rage inside him, and it never switched off. Without any prompting, he would fix on a victim and attack. He didn’t care about notoriety. Cruelty, for Ranes, was a personal thing, not to be shared.

“The other boys, including myself, treated him like you’d treat someone who was mentally ill. We kept our distance. We avoided speaking to him. We offered him smiles and deference, hoping his fury wouldn’t land on us. It was a mystery how he chose his victims, but once he’d fixed on one, there was no reprieve. The unlucky boy would find himself cornered or ambushed at the end of the day.

“I was never a target for Ranes. But he awakened something inside me.”

You pause, uncertain.

“Go ahead,” Petra says. “I’m listening.”

You don’t have to be a monster to frighten a child. Apes can be vicious. The potential is woven deep. Circumstances

are right, and there it is: the lunging strike, the hideous gape, the bared teeth.

“A boy in my class,” you say, “lived down the block, on the same side of the street. In a foursquare like ours, with a front porch.

“His name—call him Moon, he had a round face like a saucer jelly. He was my height but overweight, with curly hair flopping over his brow. Moon wasn’t dumb, but he wasn’t bright. He had a get-along way and a nervous laugh. Because he lived so close, we were occasional playmates. We’d throw a ball in his yard or sit on the floor of his room and play cards.

“For some reason, my irritation with him began to grow. He was timid and self-effacing. When I imagined myself expressing frustration with him, threatening him, I couldn’t picture him standing up to me.

“Without being willful or calculating, I began to imagine a confrontation. I had no thought of Ranes. He was repellent to me. But I was drawn—powerfully drawn—to the idea that I could beat up Moon. And I was curious—intensely curious—about how it would feel to wield that kind of power over another.

“The opportunity grew inside me. It was something I had to do.”

You’re nervous, and Petra can see that. But there’s no stopping now.

“Because we lived on the same block, from time to time we’d walk home together. And it was on one of those walks after school, in the late afternoon, that the opportunity arose.

“We were approaching Moon’s lawn and the walkway leading to his porch. I had been quiet, letting him talk. He started toward the porch and I followed. He was smiling, chattering, being his vacuous self. He expected me to say goodbye, to turn and start back. Instead, I let my contempt loose.

“Contempt. That’s what it was. Moon’s smiling stupidity, his pathetic weakness, his solicitous mom— He had rankled me for longer than I knew.”

You draw a breath.

“I’m listening,” Petra says.

“My arm drew back,” you tell her. “I struck him in the face with my fist.

“I was sure he would wither, and that’s what he did. He ducked his head and sank. I saw the shock in his face and the fear in his eyes, and I struck him again. Moon began to cry, and I knew then that I was the victor and he the vanquished.

“The feeling of power stirred me. Cowering, he curled at my feet and I struck him again. His nose made a cracking sound.

“He was whimpering. There was no point in delivering additional blows. My mission was accomplished. The moment of glory had ended. There was blood on my fist.

“I drew myself up, surveyed the damage, then turned on my heel, strode down the walkway and continued home.

“It was then that guilt loomed over me.

“What had I done? Why had I done it? My attack had been unprovoked. Moon was innocent. He’d been a friend. His mother had made us sandwiches, we’d played together on

his bedroom floor. I'd been tempted and I'd feasted on cruelty. I was Ranee now.

"The power I'd won came at a cost. Could you do what I'd done without feeling bad? No. You couldn't."

You've avoided Petra's eyes, but now it's time to look.

Is she shocked? Repulsed? Will she dismiss the account as a child's mistake, not recognizing it for what it was?

She's considering your words. In her eyes, you can see conjectures, a recognition of things unexpected, beyond her view. She isn't going to judge you or try to change you. Or cast you as something you're not. You're like a fossil she's found: proof of a different life, mysterious, harrowing perhaps, but with its own integrity.

"The wounds from that day never healed," you say. "Moon and I were classmates through high school. We passed each other, but our eyes never met. We never spoke, but whenever I saw him, I felt his humiliation. And my shame remained, along with— A residue of triumph. I wondered if an apology would matter, but I feared that any mention of what I'd done would only reopen the wound."

A residue of triumph. You said it, my boy.

You kept the memory inside you, like a jewel in a velvet box.

The time has come to stop twisting your hanky. Stop nursing your guilt. Embrace your inner Ranee. The job with Moon is unfinished. Even now he's wrenching between your jaws. Turn that fool so his nose is pointed down your throat and swallow him whole.

Are you listening to me?

Your new acquaintance understands.

Minnows dream of being big fish. Only a few become one. You're not eight anymore. You've lived in the Sea, and you know its rules.

A crawling snail: "What a pleasure to graze!"

A nest of drifting worms: "We breed fear in no one. Follow our fine example."

A baculite whines, "Don't steal my life! I'm not your food."

Does Xiphactinus care?

We who prey are true to ourselves. Taking life from others isn't a flaw. It makes us truer. We're exemplars of unflinching purpose. We know who we are, and we're not going to change.

You pay the check and the two of you exit the restaurant.

On the street, a man in rags accosts Petra. He's demanding money, fuming at her, belligerent, crazy. Before you can react, Petra's shouting, swinging her fists, backing the man against the wall, eyes wilder than his. There's fear in the crazy man's eyes. He's mute, and his jaw is quivering. You grab Petra's shoulders and pull her away, and the homeless man nods to you with thanks and relief.

HOUSE FOR SALE

Petra is at the museum with Dick, removing fossilized ribs and disks from a hunk of chalk she's brought him. You're in your hotel room, on the phone with your divorce attorney.

"Kath doesn't want the family home," she says.

"I don't want it either," you reply. Too many memories.

"So it's yours to sell. That's the good news."

"Go ahead," you say.

"She's focused on the fact that you will soon be managing partner of your venture firm, and the next fund will be larger—much larger, she says—than any that have preceded it. She's claiming that the future value of your earnings will eclipse whatever wealth the two of you currently have. As a consequence, she believes she should be awarded all the current liquid assets."

"All?" You remember Kath's "everything" threat.

"Stocks, bonds, the metal holdings in Canada and Australia. Cars, the yacht, and all the remote properties, including your two vacation homes. When will the new fund close?" the attorney asks.

“We’re discussing that now with our investors.”

“If it closes before the divorce is final,” she says, “or before we have an agreement in writing, your wife could challenge your ownership.”

From an ape perspective, you’re legally bound.

“It’s a first salvo, of course. But right now, the only thing she’s willing to concede is your primary residence. She has no desire to live there and is willing to give you title if you hand over the whole caboodle.”

“That’s ridiculous,” you say.

“I agree. But— Getting parties in a divorce to be realistic takes time. Her counsel gave me Kath’s perspective on the marriage, if you’d like to know.”

“Go ahead.”

“She’s angry. She thinks you used her. She raised the children. She never saw you. You spent your time flying around the country, raising money, sitting on boards. You were successful because she made the sacrifice to manage everything else. Without her, there would be no wealth to argue about.

“So you know what we’re dealing with,” she says in an apologetic tone.

“What about my boys?” you ask.

“Her attorney says your wife’s talked to them, but they don’t want to see you.”

“That’s bullshit,” you say. “They’re four and five.”

“Without her agreement or a court mediator, we can’t compel her to agree to visitation.”

When you’re done, you return a call from Soritec’s general

counsel.

"Any progress?"

"A little," he says.

"Settlement discussions?"

"Not yet. Everyone's feeling harassed. Management's angry and so is the board. We've done nothing wrong."

"That's irrelevant."

"I know," the lawyer says. "Eventually they'll resign themselves."

"Our D & O insurer's involved?"

"Yes, but they're in no hurry."

"Alright," you say. "Keep me posted."

You disconnect and call your venture fund's outside counsel. Yes, they tell you, they're tracking Soritec: the board's chafed, the insurer's quibbling, settlement discussions have yet to commence. With elasmosaurs, you give them something and they disappear. But it never happens quickly. It's all palsy and indirection: the human way.

You phone Prentiss and speak to him about the documents Rohrig requested. They've been produced, but now he's asking for more. Your last call is a long one to Tanya, Gnogen's general counsel.

"Rohrig's got blood in his eye," she says.

You can hear the fear in her voice.

"Things are moving quickly," she says. "He's asked to depose the entire management team and all our board members. We've started into that. George thinks—" She stops herself.

“What does George think?”

“Rohrig’s questions always point back to you. George thinks he’s trying to get a publicity splash by preventing your new fund from closing.”

“George may be right,” you say.

In the late afternoon, Petra arrives. You meet her in the hotel lobby.

She’s wearing a pullover flecked with plaster. You greet her with a kiss on the lips that’s heated and lingers. Then you take her hand.

“My escort into the past,” you say.

“What’s next?”

“The block I grew up on. It’s close.”

You cross the campus together, descend the walkway and pass through the opening in the batten fence. When you reach the gray-green foursquare, you explain that it’s the family home and direct her attention to your bedroom upstairs. Then you continue along the sidewalk. You’re leading her to the house on the corner.

“I was ten,” you say. “This place was for sale. There was a metal sign right there.” You point at the grass. “On the way back from school, I would stoop at the corner and pick up some gravel. When I reached the *For Sale* sign, I’d ping it. *Bang, bang*, just for fun.

“One afternoon, I’m passing and pinging, and the front door opens. A realtor comes out of the house and races toward me. ‘Stop that,’ he shouts. Then he grabs my shirt and shakes me.

“He was small and older, with spectacles.

“When I got home, my father was in the den. I started toward my room.

“‘Your shirt’s torn,’ he said.

“I saw that it was. ‘A man did it,’ I told him.

“‘What man?’ He rose with a suspicious look.

“When I explained what had happened, he grabbed me by the arm and marched me toward the door. I thought he was angry with me, but it was quickly clear that I wasn’t the target.

“He hurried me down the block. When we got here, the little old man was by the front door.

“‘Is that him?’ my father asked me.

“I nodded.

“The little old man called to someone inside the house, then he ran to the *For Sale* sign and pulled it out of the dirt, holding the post as if he was going to defend himself with it. My father headed through the plantings toward him. The little old man was frightened and so was I.

“My father was six-two, big-boned with black hair that he combed straight back. He grabbed the little old man and lifted him up.

“He shook him and raged in his face. The little old man dropped the *For Sale* sign, and a woman emerged from the house. ‘I’m calling the police,’ she said.

“I started to cry.

“My father looked at me, laughed and shook the little old man. I’d never seen an adult attack another.

“Father was still shaking and threatening when the sirens sounded.

“He dropped the little old man, who lay huddled there among the plantings.

“A squad car sped up the street, and the woman ran toward it, waving her arms.

“A policeman left the car, strode past me and helped the little old man to his feet. Another approached my father. The adults talked for a while, then they escorted my father and the little old man to the squad car, and the car disappeared down the street.

“I walked home alone—amazed that my father had gone to such lengths to defend me, but shocked by it all. When Mother asked, I explained what had happened.

“Later that evening, Father returned in high spirits. No charges would be pressed, he said. The police were on his side, he boasted.

“During the days that followed, I thought about what had happened. I began to wonder if my father’s outburst had anything to do with defending me. A few weeks later, he confirmed my suspicion, leaving Mother and I without a word of goodbye.

“I was at a school awards dinner, seated at a long table. Mother was on my right and there was an empty seat on my left. Father was going to come straight from work. But he didn’t show up. He had emptied the bank account and flown to Fiji.”

“Not really,” Petra says.

“Really. It was ten years before I saw him again.”

She looks from you to the corner house, then she takes your hand.

“We had some good times,” you say, softly now. “There was a barbecue place in East Lawrence, and we’d go there together. I remember the sawdust on the floor and the smell of smoke. To spare me the conflicts at home, he took me with him on weekends. I’d sit on his office floor and read while he worked.”

But the memory of the home for sale has spoiled your mood.

You’re wondering, and I’m wondering too: why did you bring Petra here? This street, these houses— They’d forgotten you. They hadn’t thought about you for thirty years. When you die, it won’t make any difference to them. Why should they care?

THE BIG FISH

"I first saw the Xiphactinus fossil just before my father vanished."

Petra's lying naked on the bed in your hotel room, and you're stretched beside her. Below your ribs, the overlapped crescents left by her teeth look like scales.

"Right after he attacked the realtor— The next weekend, in the middle of the day— They were in the front room. Mother was chewing him out. He was silent, sullen; and then he exploded. I had crept downstairs and was watching.

"Father spotted me. He grabbed my arm and tugged me between them, boiling with rage. Mother was oblivious, lost in her fury, railing at him.

"He hurried me down the hall, opened the back door and pulled me out. He ordered me into the car. Where were we going? I huddled on the seat, afraid to speak.

"He circled the block, silent, aimless. Then he drove with purpose. A few minutes later, he pulled into a parking lot, killed the engine and sat there, staring through the windshield. Then he opened his door, came around to my side and took my hand.

“We were by a large stone building, and he was leading me up the steps.

“As close as we lived to it, I hadn’t been to the museum before. The entrance seemed imposing. The arches of carved stone above. The copper handrail burnt my palm. I saw my face in the glass of the door.

“What was he thinking? Did he imagine this would be a distraction that would blot out the shock of a family in ruins? Or did he have some other reason for bringing me there?”

Was he handing you over to the big fish?

“He took me to the Marine Hall straightaway.”

No, my boy. Your father had no plan. He had no idea how lost you were. I was guiding him, as I’ve guided you. My voice reached him in glubs, and he descended the stairwell with you in tow, headed toward the Age of Reptiles and a time when Kansas was the most dangerous place in the world.

He didn’t know where he was going. But as you passed the fossil dioramas, he could hear—over the *pad* of his shoes on the tile—a voice strange and inhuman, whispering in his ear.

And when you reached the corridor junction and turned to see the display on the wall, you heard it too:

I am Xiphactinus. I was born in the late Cretaceous, as the plaque says. Creation has set loose many terrible fish, but none as large or as dangerous. My singularity preserves me. As you can see, I’m still here.

I’m fast and vicious, and I have no qualms. No reservations. In preying on others, I follow, without hesitation, the instincts destiny gave me. I have a nature as simple as air, as pure as salt.

I'm not fettered by guilt. I shrink at nothing. I leap and lunge, wielding judgment, knowing I'm a monster to all I meet. I bring pain, pain and death. Devouring those who lie in my path pleases me greatly.

You shuddered. You clung to your father's leg. I imagined you then as a naked infant curled on your mother's belly, stunned, mouth wide, losing her nipple.

With a bubble of milk on your lips, you stared at me. And what did you see? My skull glittered with silver sparks, fluorescent needles rayed from my ribs, my powerful tail loosed haloes and the currents trembled as I passed.

You were powerfully drawn. You loosened your clutch, your arm fell from your father's thigh. You took a step toward me and raised your hand to the glass.

A half-pint ape! An unhappy one: cursed by fate, condemned to a crust of earth and a life of dependence on others. Dependence! For food, for shelter, for power and worth—What a miserable life! What a sorry existence!

My jaw flexed and my ray fins spread. And at that, your young mind reeled.

Don't go, you implored. Don't return down the funnel of time. Don't dive for the depths. Stay here with me.

Your desperate face, the rashness I saw through the glass—And the raw presumption—so pleasing to me, I admit: that your wretched existence—dubious, threatened—might be guided by mine.

My jaw gaped. Fish don't laugh, but I was fiercely amused—and entertained! *The boy's imagining that I'm his*

father, I thought. He thinks he can shuffle me under his arm and hobble through life using me as his crutch.

I was born to kill, and the millennia have done nothing to change me. But I was charmed by your fascination with the abyss and a monster who was at home in it. If you chose to carry a picture of me into adulthood, like a photo in a locket, who was I to complain?

Petra is watching you.

"I was transfixed," you tell her. "Xiphactinus seemed like a truth that, up till then, had been hidden from me. He was millions of years old, but he was whispering close. His violent nature, his untamed cravings were fully awake in my brain. I could feel the brutality in his bulky shoulders and his bulldog jaw. I could see the vicious intent in his eye and the glint on his spiked teeth. His ray fin waved the dark current against my side."

"That's why you're here," Petra says.

"Danger has brought me back," you tell her. "I'm not sure what I should do."

"You're not sure who you are," she says as if you'd not spoken.

Clever girl. Does she imagine that through my unblinking eyes you will see yourself and your confusion will end? Does she think she can help silence the chorus of lies, the chirping of apes, like a million terrified minnows. "No, no," they insist, "the monster that lives in Dun's mind— That isn't him."

But maybe it is.

YOU CAN HELP ME



n alert on your phone chimes.

“Sorry,” you say. “There’s a video call I have to be on.”

You’re still naked, still in bed with Petra. If you join the call now, she will learn a lot. Maybe it’s time.

“It’s with the board,” you say, “of a company named Soritec. I’m a director.”

“Do you want me to leave?” she asks.

You shake your head, sitting up. “Don’t trade any Soritec stock. You could go to jail.”

The connection is made and faces appear on the screen of your phone.

After greetings, the company’s general counsel begins his update.

“Interrogatories,” he says, “and document requests. Lots of them.” And he launches into the details. There are questions from other directors for the company’s outside counsel and the CEO. You’re looking at Petra, and she’s looking at you, wondering what it means. You shake your head at her, sharing your impatience and irritation with those on the call. Finally you speak.

“When will settlement discussions begin?”

Your question triggers angry reactions from other board members. “Fight them in court,” one says. “They won’t get a dime,” another agrees. “We’ve done nothing wrong,” the CEO says. And the company’s general counsel adds, “Our insurers are dragging their feet.”

“That’s no surprise,” you observe. “What does the voice of experience say?” Your question is directed at Soritec’s outside counsel, who deals with class-action suits every day.

“While it’s true,” the man answers, “that Soritec’s done nothing wrong, there’s a chance of a negative outcome in court. And that would be catastrophic. Inevitably, these cases end with a settlement. Your adversaries know that.”

You imagine the lead elasmosaur’s grin and his bad breath. As large as his body was, and as fierce as he looked when his fangs unmeshed, he isn’t expecting to take you down. Or even draw blood. The importune beast is betting you will retch up something for him and his pals.

“Churn the water if you like,” you say, addressing the board. “Let me know when settlement talks begin.”

You disconnect and set your phone on the bedstand. A beam from the window is touching Petra’s chest, lighting the nipple torn by a dog. It’s like a miniature pie with a wedge removed.

You lie back down, resting your head on the pillow a foot from hers.

“Trouble,” she says.

“I’m under a lot of pressure right now.”

“Legal pressure,” she says.

“Yes. From the class-action suit. From my wife. And from the government too.”

That’s a lot of information. Is it too much for Petra?

“On the ninth floor,” she says raising herself, “there’s a roof-deck. Let’s have a look at the view.”

The two of you dress, take the elevator up and ascend two flights of stairs. From the railing of the roof deck, you can see the Natural History Museum.

“We’re on top of Mount Oread,” Petra says. She points at Fraser Hall and the flags flying at its top. “What happened after your father left?”

“Mother sold the house. We moved to an apartment in East Lawrence. After that, we traded down every few years. Each was a cheaper place in a seedier location.”

“You went to high school here?”

You nod and point to the south, beyond Fraser. “My future hinged on college. When I felt myself sinking, I’d visit the museum. It was my refuge. I felt more a part of that world than of the real one around me.”

Petra is nodding. “My life belongs to the Sea.”

“You’ve learned a lot about me,” you say. “Why have you told me so little about yourself?”

“We’re the same,” she replies. “I had my roots cut out from under me. I’m not a part of this. Any of this.”

You can see her chipped tooth and the grit in her eyes. With apes, grace is often a feminine trait, but there’s none in Petra.

“You’re tough,” you say.

“Paleontology is an elitist world, and I don’t have a PhD. I’ve found some important fossils, but if I make a buck selling one, they think it’s a sin. Other than a few friends like Dick, I’m on my own.”

She turns to the west, toward the declining sun and the chalky hills. Hills that once held my bones.

You take her hand, feeling its warmth.

“Let me show you my world,” Petra says. “You can help me.”

You remember the first time you saw her. That squint, her silver-blue eyes, the off-center hair— She’s made her home in a desolate place, a land of ghosts and fossils, and she wants to take you with her.

You don’t have long. You’ll have to return to California.

She turns and puts her lips to your cheek.

“You’re revealing yourself,” she says. “Exhuming your past, bone by bone. I’m seeing you, Dun. As you were, as you are—”

There’s passion in her voice, and urgency too.

“The look back,” she says, “will solve the riddle of the way forward. I’m a good listener, aren’t I?”

“Exceptional.”

“I’m not afraid of monsters,” she says. “I’ve dug up quite a few.”

“How would I help you?”

“I’m working on an important find. Some of it’s still in the chalk. I could use a hand.”

“When would we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

3



FOSSIL WAGON

As you dress the next morning, you can see the sun rising through the hotel window: a golden portal to a sea of flame. You return your rental car, load your bags into the back of Petra's fossil wagon, an old Suburban, and leave Lawrence. Petra is at the wheel.

As you cross the Kaw, she looks at you. "*Koya yali* is a Kanza expression. It means 'trusted friend.'"

"We're good together," you nod.

Petra lifts her chin. "We're not trying to fix each other."

She turns onto Highway 70. "Heading for the chalk is a drive back in time."

The roadcut rock is amber and sand, like an orange peel muffin.

"It must have been hard," Petra says, "when your father left."

"I was a wreck."

There was no quelling your feelings of betrayal and loss. A right-minded fish would have mustered his daring and struck out on his own. Survival means forcing yourself on an unwilling world.

“Mother would sit in an armchair and sob for hours. I was fearful at first, then bitter and insolent. I swore, I fought, I wrote on the walls. I mocked my teachers and spent fifth grade at a desk facing the back of the room. Finally I stifled my vitriol and focused on grades.

“Mother was hopeless. She escaped her failure by losing herself in delusions.”

“Of what?” Petra asks.

“In her teens, she’d dreamt of being a dancer. She wore a costume and quoted French poetry. She was unemployable. We lived on what my father left behind.”

“No relatives?”

“She has an older sister, my Aunt Helene. Helene and Luther, her husband, lived in Overland Park. Their children were grown, on the East Coast. For a couple of years, I stayed with them on weekends. My aunt was kind to me. She fixed me lunch, washed my clothes, talked to me about school and what I was reading. I did carpentry with my uncle. He had a shop and he liked having someone to jabber with.

“‘The human race is a mess,’ he said while he sawed and hammered. ‘Wealth can be shared. Violence can be tamed. If you’re feeling aggressive,’ he said, ‘dig a hole and plant a tree.’”

A tree! Oh yes. Dear Uncle Luther.

“They enjoyed my company. Their affection stirred a new hope. I imagined I was earning a place with them. I spoke to my mother. If Helene and Luther would have me, I suggested, I could live with them. A discussion ensued.

“At the end of it, Mother explained that Helene and Luther

had declined my offer.

“That brought an end to the weekend visits. On the phone, my aunt was self-conscious—guilty, I guess, about having rejected me.”

Your feelings were bruised. I told you to purge your mind of pipe dreams and count on yourself. You heard me, but—

“Are they still alive?” Petra asks.

“Helene is. Luther died of a heart attack a few years after I left Lawrence.”

Let’s not mention the coat.

“After the funeral, a box arrived with one of Luther’s coats in it. I wore it till the seams split and the cloth fell apart.”

Maudlin, my boy.

“You couldn’t let go,” Petra sighs.

“I managed to get into college on my own. I completed the documents and forged Mother’s signature. I didn’t tell her I was going until the last moment. I had already found a ride and packed my clothes. That’s how I got to California.”

“She stayed in Lawrence?” Petra asks.

“No. The irony is: it was Mother who went to live with Helene and Luther. Not long after I left, she reached a point where she couldn’t take care of herself.”

CRISTIE

Ilat expanses roll by—grazing land, parched cornfields, straggling thickets. Then out of the silence, your voice rises.

“My freshman year, I discovered love.”

Petra glances at you, then returns her gaze to the roadway.

“It was a chance encounter,” you say, “on a corner at the edge of campus. I was attracted by her concerted look, her serious eyes. I remarked on that and she laughed.”

And so the delusions begin. Fish don’t laugh. Reptiles don’t laugh. Among the hordes of invertebrates that filled the Interior Sea there wasn’t a joke to be heard. Amusement disrupts the gravity of survival. Mirth, for men, is a sign of weakness, an appeal for détente.

“Her name was Cristie,” you say. A swarthy mestizo with a fiery heart. “She changed my life.”

“How did she change it?”

“She was raw. Naked emotionally. There was no camouflage. No layers to pierce or strip away. My knowledge of her was instantaneous.”

“She trusted you,” Petra says.

“And that gave me the courage to express my deepest emotions to her. Within a few days, I felt like I’d known her all my life.”

What a fool you were.

“I was a fool. What did I know about women and love?”

A forlorn sigh.

“With Cristie, I was someone else. Someone I’d never met. All I had known was guarded desire, hidden thoughts, subverted feelings. Suddenly everything was exposed. There was no defense or protection, no ambivalence or indirection.

“A new life opened before me, a life of faith and boundless affection. A life that revealed, without conditions, the mysteries of love, the secrets of joy. I’d been born blind, and I was seeing for the first time.”

The creature you’d fallen for appeared like a drifting cinnoid colony. Hundreds of them, each with a cap and arms trailing down. Rare, sensitive, ephemeral. And puzzling. Where had she drifted from? Where was she going? Her myriad arms feel the currents so deftly. Are they really collecting food?

“My outlook on the world changed. Thankful for the gift I’d received, I was generous to others. I wanted to be gallant, heroic—”

“Gallant?”

“If there was a dispute between classmates, I’d be the peacemaker. If I saw an elderly person struggling, I’d hurry to help.

“We were on our way back from campus. There were three

boys, maybe eight years old. They had a smaller kid backed up against a phone pole and they were threatening him. He was crying. I charged the bigger kids and they scattered. The little guy hugged me and thanked me through his tears. Cristie melted.”

She hadn’t an ounce of sense.

“I was the defender of innocence,” you say.

You were lost, my boy. Lost as the neighborhood cat. Did you see the note on the phone pole? Someone had posted a plea and a photo of a tabby with mackerel stripes.

What was Cristie really? Comfort in weakness. Rules of life that were easy to grasp. The fairy tale that an abandoned child had never been told.

Through the windshield, the horizon is bristling with windmills, tall and white and triple-bladed.

“She moved in with me. It all happened quickly. I had no idea that the things I was experiencing were possible. I wanted them more than anything, and she did too. It didn’t matter what we were feeling—humor, concern, affection, fear—That richness had never been within reach, and now it was pouring out.”

“And in bed?” Petra asks.

“No doubts, no defenses. We weren’t just looking into each other’s eyes, kissing each other’s lips; we weren’t just mixing our sweat. We were mixing our hearts and our spirits. We were pure and unafraid.”

You’re speaking to Petra as if she’s Cristie. As if you’re alone with her. As if I’m not here. And Petra is slowing.

She's taking an exit, pulling the car to the side of the road, parking by a field of burgundy milo. The car jerks to a halt. She kills the engine and faces you.

Petra motions for you to get out, and she does the same. She steps to the Suburban's rear, raises the hatch and pulls out a blanket. Then she nods at you and leads the way to a ravine beside the road.

"It's wonderful," she says, "knowing you aren't alone in the world."

She points at a level spot between the ravine walls and descends. At the bottom, she opens her arms, spreads the blanket and unfastens her shirt.

You close your eyes as if to summon the past. Then you're following her example. In your attraction to Petra now, you're like a patient with a nurse.

Naked, she lies on her back and reaches her hands toward you. You kneel between her thighs and the memories of Cristie return, along with a thumping in your chest.

"I'm Cristie," Petra whispers, playing the part. "Love isn't painted on. Faith isn't medicine for a sickly mind; it's inborn, rising from a natural purity."

She's singing your song, using your words.

And when you enter her, she lavishes you with the same blind acceptance and adulation you felt back then. Your strokes are heroic. The fossil hunter is a teenager now, blind as a crinoid, divining the miraculous in your blasted heart.

Can she see your ugliness? Is she blind to the scars of cruelty endured and transferred to others? Oh no, you're a

beautiful creature again! Again you hear a wistful sigh and feel a trusting soul close to yours.

You replay that youthful passion, spilling your sperm inside Petra as if the bones of Cristie were buried there and your release would stir them.

Unlearned man, pitiful boy—

It's a difficult moment for me. That you're still carrying that desperate longing— That you've never let go— You've tried my patience—greatly, I say—on this hot afternoon.

MINGLED DELUSIONS

Petra is freeing the syrupy memories inside you. You're miring yourself in nostalgia and the weakness it's restored. And—no surprise—the more you share of your first romance, the more you feel the old desperation.

Don't you understand? The ghost of Cristie walks with poverty, abandonment and alienation. Throwing your lot in with her may have seemed a brave act at the time. But it was fear that drove you both—fear and insecurity. Two teen fools lost in mingled delusions, while monsters circled with gaping jaws.

"It's so flat." You're eyeing the terrain through the glass. Despite growing up in Kansas, you've never been this far west. "Was there water here?"

"We're on the shore," Petra replies.

Silence. Then she says, "You've never let go of her."

"No," you sigh, "I haven't. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Petra says. "Keep on. I'm listening."

"It was a magical time. When we considered the future, what we might do, where we might go— Neither of us cared. It could be anything, anywhere, as long as we were together.

As long as we preserved the depth of emotion we'd found in each other.

"We took the same classes. We got part-time jobs. We moved into a room in a communal house."

And you put me at a distance. Don't think my feelings were hurt. I knew, oh I knew: the boy's troubles aren't over. They were just beginning.

"I was someone else," you tell Petra, "more handsome, more noble, more idealistic. I saw a new Dun in her eyes. I've never felt so close to anyone."

Petra is fixed on the road, but she's nodding.

"You can't hurt someone," you say, "who makes you feel like that. I would have died before I disappointed her. I've never experienced that with anyone else. I shouldn't be telling you this."

Petra ignores the apology.

"Maybe," she says, "that only can happen when we're young."

"Maybe," you say, "it can only happen once."

Maybe it's a delusion unique to apes. You hear my whisper, but Petra cannot. You're trying to ignore me, but I'm not going to let you.

"She wanted to get married. As close as we were, a future as adults was hard to imagine. The prospect raised fears from my past. Could what we were feeling last for the rest of our lives?"

This nonsense about wives, my boy, is hard to fathom. You *have* a wife. Where is she now? In her attorney's office? On the

beach in Baja? At a desk, adding the totals she'll pillage from the family accounts?

Cristie wasn't a crinoid colony. There were leathery wings beneath her skin. Not that she knew, of course. Until she spread them.

For a Cretaceous fish, these things were simpler. The airborne reptiles lived in a different realm. You were below, in the Sea—more monstrous, more dangerous the larger you grew. When you rose to the surface, you could see them swooping, airy and graceful. They were cautious, fearful of you. But they had to eat. You sculled, watching, waiting for one to descend, spreading her scythes, gliding over the chop, dimpling the water with her pointed bill.

Your romance with Cristie was the same as later liaisons. No different than Kath or the woman at the wheel beside you. All were a matter of chance. They descended at an opportune moment and you struck.

When you reached your jaws for the spindly body, how much thought did you give to selection? Be honest now. It was instinct that drove you, and chance that determined who your prey was. Your spiked teeth pierced the velvety skin, crushing her bones. Her drum-taut wings folded as you dragged her down.

I know, I know. It seemed different with Cristie. She didn't think of herself as prey. She didn't think marriage meant being devoured, living the rest of her life in your gut while you prowled the deep. She imagined that you'd sprout wings, and the two of you would fly away together.

That was the delusion on which her longing for marriage was based. And it was your desire to share her delusion that led you to seek out your father.

RUTHLESS

Petra is pointing at a sign by the roadside.
“We’re leaving Saline County. Those outcrops are Dakota sandstone. Everything beyond here was once the Interior Sea.”

The sky is gray now, striped by cloud corrugations like moving waves. But the only monsters visible are grain elevators.

“I was twenty,” you say. “We were both still in school.”

Cristie had taken control. Your heart was full of false hope. Would you spend the rest of your life with her? Yes, every hour of it! Where had these strange thoughts come from? So earnest, so idealistic, so utterly bereft of caution or sense.

“I was young to be weighing these things,” you say, “but I thought: *I may never meet another like her. I may never feel this close to a woman again.* She was serious about a lifelong commitment. And I was serious too.”

Yes, you were. There was a moment when I thought it was over between us. *Ruthless*. That word marked the moment.

“On the eve of our commitment,” you explain, “doubts surfaced. Troubling thoughts. Not thoughts about Cristie. Thoughts about my damaged youth, my broken family and

what it meant.

"I wanted to see him again. My father."

"He'd come back from Fiji?" Petra says.

"He had. He'd landed in the Southwest, at a pharmaceutical lab."

"What were you looking for?" she asks.

"The past haunted me. I wanted to see my father with adult eyes, not as my mother saw him, not as the child remembered him. I wanted to know who he really was. Before I pledged my life to Cristie, I needed some settling, some confidence."

"You didn't want to let her down," Petra says.

"No, I didn't.

"He'd remarried. He had a daughter and was living in Tucson. I called him and he agreed to meet. I arrived as the family dinner was ending."

Petra is frowning, trying to imagine. "How long had it been?"

"Ten years. His wife and child went to bed. We stayed up all night talking. I asked him a lot of questions. His answers were frank but clipped."

"Like?"

"Why did you marry my mother?"

"What was his answer?"

"A feeling I had."

Petra is puzzled.

"I asked him what he saw in her. 'She was feminine,' he said, as if that was enough."

"He was sorry he'd abandoned you," Petra guesses.

“No. For him, it was all in the past—a faded memory.

“Finally, as the rising sun lit the kitchen curtains, I asked for his perspective on life. ‘You’ve seen a lot and done a lot,’ I said. ‘What have you learned that you want to share with your twenty-year-old son?’ He nodded, understanding my question.”

“What was his answer?”

“‘I was naïve,’ he said. ‘If I could do it over again, I would be more ruthless.’”

“Ruthless.” Petra’s surprised.

I remember the moment, my boy. The word cast you back to the afternoon we first met. In a heartbeat, you divided yourself from home and parents, from your piscine mentor and the primeval Sea. You thought: the big fish behind the glass was no different than the monster seated before you. This mean-spirited fellow—your father—wished he’d been more like me!

Petra’s eyes are dark. “How did you react?”

And you replay for her that moment of childish idealism:

“I wasn’t going to let his values ruin my life.”

Ruthless offended you. I was there, watching and listening, finning behind you. I could feel your recoil, and I was stunned.

Had my patronage been for naught?

Where are the creatures now living or once alive that wished continuance for others but an end for themselves? Show me these noble beings, these martyrs and saints; and dour as I am, I’ll discover the means to laugh.

Not that I think a parent deserves any tribute. Mine were strangers, and if I were to chance on either, I would as soon eat them as any fish in the sea. But *Ruthless* is life's dictum. The quality humans call "sacrifice," the pretense of self-abnegation, is a myth authored by vanished genes. The stories, the treasured examples, the triumphs of conscience to benefit a common good— They're the rationalizations of beings who can't survive on their own.

What made your father repellent wasn't his self-interest. It was his fantasy that he could be a predator, and a dutiful mate and parent at the same time.

But . . . my arguments meant nothing. Being young and naïve, you rejected *Ruthless* and me as well. And with that, your pact with Cristie was sealed.

INVERTEBRATE LIFE

Petra pulls into a gas station. You fill the tank, pay at the kiosk and buy drinks. Then you're back on the road. "How far are we?" you ask.

"Halfway."

You wonder: if you hid yourself in a town out here, would your assailants find you? They wouldn't forget their grievances. But if your days as a big fish were over and they got whatever you'd left behind, they'd probably leave you to oblivion.

"The pact with Cristie," Petra prompts you.

You open a bottle and take a swallow. "It was a simple wedding. A chapel in the hills, a few college friends and a minister who made no mention of God at our request. Cristie was casually dressed, but I'd never seen her so serene. Like a drifting kite on a gentle wind, a wind that had blown for ages and would never stop."

At graduation, the new reality settled in. You had a wife now and responsibility.

"Survival required some compromises," you say.

And you made them. You embraced the challenge. You had a reason now to make yourself part of the human community.

“My college degree meant nothing. I applied for a number of jobs and took one in a local restaurant, washing dishes and bussing tables. Long hours, hard work, low pay. Then the restaurant went under.

“The gas company was re-routing lines in San Francisco—lines buried in the soft fill used a century before to extend the city into the bay. The day I applied, they offered me a job.”

“Trying to fit into their world,” Petra says.

“Trying to fit in.”

A monster’s fry swimming with sponges and worms. Three winks at the bottom of the food chain, mixing with invertebrate life.

“They gave me a hard hat and assigned me to the graveyard shift. I showed up at midnight and worked till dawn, digging with a pick and shovel. Those with seniority ran jackhammers. A few drove dozers or loaders.”

How virtuous, doing as your fellows did, filtering muck, subsisting on the dregs of the sea.

“In the second week, halfway through the shift, a thin man with a ball cap grabbed my shoulder. ‘Follow me,’ he said. ‘Take your pick and shovel.’

“I didn’t know who he was or where we were headed, but I had no business asking, so I followed him. I noticed his left arm was in a sling and two fingers were missing. In his right hand, he carried a dusty suitcase.”

You followed the man around a corner and down the street.

“There were blockades everywhere. South of Market, the

roads were all torn up. The man with his arm in a sling stopped and looked around at the buildings. He walked a dozen paces, his attention on the asphalt now. 'Here,' he said, pointing down. 'Dig here. Take up the blacktop and dig straight down. Understand?'

"I nodded. 'Straight down.'"

"He left and I set to work. It was slow going. Removing asphalt without a pneumatic drill took time, but once the blacktop was out of the way, the pace picked up. The sand was damp and easy to remove. The man with his arm in a sling reappeared a few times, carrying his suitcase with him. The hole was eight feet wide and a couple of feet deep. 'Keep digging,' he said."

Petra's eyes are on the road, but she's listening, waiting.

"The shift wore on and the pit got deeper. Four feet, then five and six. I'm over my head. The sand is wet, and I can smell the sea. Then my shovel strikes something hard. *Ping.*"

Petra glances at you.

"When I cleared the sand away, I saw a metal curvature, perfectly symmetrical. *A pipe*, I thought. I dug around it. It was four or five feet in diameter.

"When the man returns, he sees the pipe and he smiles. 'Good job,' he says. He sets down his suitcase, kneels and unlatches it. From down in the pit, I watch him remove two metal objects. When he's screwed them together, it looks like a telescope.

"'Get out,' he says, and when I climb out, he lowers himself into the pit with the telescope under his bandaged arm.

“I couldn’t see what he was doing, but he managed to secure the device so it stood straight up from the pipe. He attached a horizontal bar to the telescope’s top. It made a clicking noise, like a ratchet. Then he climbed out.

“‘Alright,’ he said. ‘Get down there and crank.’

“So I lowered myself into the hole, grabbed the bar with both hands and cranked. The ratchet clicked and the telescope turned. ‘What am I doing?’ I said.

“The man shook his head. It wasn’t my place to ask. He stepped away from the pit and disappeared.

“I continued cranking for half an hour. Then all at once I hear a hissing.

“It seems impossible that my cranking is freeing gas from the pipe, but the odor is unmistakable. I stop cranking. I climb out of the pit and go looking for the guy. He’s with diggers two blocks away.

“‘What is it?’ he asks.

“‘I seem to have put a hole in the pipe. It’s hissing.’

“He nods, as if what I’m telling him is no surprise.

“‘It smells like gas,’ I say. ‘I think you should have a look.’

“He finds my suggestion reasonable, so we return to the pit together. He kneels at the rim and looks down. Apparently, it’s all as he expects. ‘Keep cranking,’ he says.

“‘You’re sure?’ I ask.

“‘Keep cranking,’ he nods. So he left, and I descended back into the pit.”

The moment of truth, my boy. I remember it well.

You stood on the briny sand, listening to the hiss and

smelling the gas. You put your hands on the bar and cranked. *Click. Click.* And then a trumpet of contempt blared in your ears. Contempt and indignation. You were taking orders from a witless creature—a belemnite with a pea-sized brain. He was moving backward through life, waving his crippled tentacles, oblivious to danger. And you were following his lead.

“That was enough. The fool was going to kill me. I climbed out of the pit and found him again.

“‘What is it?’ he asked.

“‘Are you sure you know what you’re doing?’ My tone was challenging now. ‘There’s gas coming out of that pipe.’

“I could see the dawn of doubt in his eyes.

“He stepped toward a man who looked like a supervisor. After a brief exchange, they started for the hole. I followed, thirty feet behind.

“They reached the pit’s rim and the supervisor looked down. When he raised his head, his eyes were wide. Then the two of them hurried away.

“I retreated to a safe distance, posting myself beside a street lamp to see what would happen next.

“The supervisor reappeared alongside the man with his arm in a sling and someone more senior.”

A different animal now—one with a spine.

“When the senior man reached the pit and looked down, he reacted with shock and disbelief, and he summoned help. A few minutes later a gas company vehicle arrived with more important people. They eyed the leaking gas main with horror and made more calls. I remained by the lamppost.

“Next, a white limousine drove up, and a man in a bathrobe stepped out. They escorted him to the pit. When he saw what the others had seen, he used his phone. I couldn’t hear what he said, but it wasn’t long before sirens sounded. A squadron of red trucks appeared with a score of firefighters.

“The trucks surrounded the pit, and ladders were extended from all sides. Firemen climbed the ladders with hoses and aimed giant nozzles at the hole. From a van, a half-dozen figures emerged in silver suits with helmets like deep-sea divers. With the firemen poised over the pit, the divers descended into it.

“I was still by the lamppost watching.

“Suddenly a geyser of gas shot into the air, white and roaring. The tapping device flew from its summit. The building opposite was three stories high, and the geyser towered over it. Then in an instant, the geyser stopped.

“Somehow the divers had corked the hole. There was no explosion, no flames for the firemen to fight.”

Petra laughs.

“The next day,” you tell her, “I turned in my hard hat.”

The fool and the geyser of gas disturbed you. But your efforts to fit in didn’t end there. Every creature that grows to great size has to run with the small, but most aren’t burdened by an affinity for the weak. While you were trying to fit in, I was trying to be patient.

DEAR JACK

Where are we?" you ask.
"You're trying to support yourself and your wife,"
Petra says.

"Physically, I mean." Beyond the windshield, the highway is empty.

"We're leaving Trego County. We're in the Fort Hays Limestone, the base layer of the Niobrara fossil beds. From these beds, Xiphactinus and the monsters of the Cretaceous arose. Those seeking their world come here. What about you and Cristie?"

"It was a rough passage," you say. "From a ditch digger, I went to a job repairing industrial laundry equipment. Cristie worked in a factory in Emeryville. Our prospects looked bleak. Should we return to school and hope an advanced degree would make a difference?"

"I responded to an ad, and the recruiter got me an interview for a sales job with a computer company. The hiring manager was looking for inexperienced kids. 'Practical savvy is all that matters,' he said."

He had no idea how little you had.

“I was offered a job in Seattle, and I took it. We gave away what little we owned, and I used an advance to buy the cheapest car we could find. Cristie piled our clothing on the back seat and we headed north.”

You dreamt of freedom. The essence of your employment, of course, was barter. Among hominids, barter rules. So you weren't really free. You were following the general example, trading servitude for subsistence. But somewhere among the thinking machines, about which you knew nothing; somewhere among the chips of melted sand soldered to boards in metal boxes— Somewhere in that electronic junkyard, you imagined a portal to freedom might appear.

“We arrived in Seattle during a storm and checked into an empty hotel. A man named Jack was waiting for me.”

Jack was an old clam, an inoceramid encrusted with oysters. And Dun was a little fish—a kansius perhaps—sheltering inside him. Our boy is still in the domain of invertebrates, the innocent, the harmless.

“Jack was in his sixties, tall and creaky, stiff with arthritis. He wore a striped vest, and he had graying hair and pale green eyes.”

Dear Jack, with his brittle shell and soft insides. How your sympathies were assailed by him! Another surrogate father—a better one. It wasn't Jack's strength you were drawn to. It was his charity.

“Jack could see my situation,” you tell Petra. “He knew how unprepared I was for the job, how unlikely it was that I would succeed. He took pity on me.”

Pity! Generosity, mercy, care! A miserable swamp, but you waded into it. While Cristie looked for a job, you spent your time in the hotel room with Jack.

“A good-sized government contract had been let for communications equipment, and Jack had been assigned to help me. My boss, eight hundred miles away, explained by phone that Jack was an expert, a technical giant. I was lucky to have that kind of help. The two of us labored day and night, and three weeks later I submitted the proposal.

“The government didn’t bother with it. They had already chosen other equipment. But I’d gotten an education from Jack, and for that I was very grateful.”

Gratitude. The lubricant of prostration, the rotting marrow of human servility.

“Jack was another surrogate father, like Uncle Luther. It was all still there,” you confess to Petra. “My youthful wounds, the pain of being abandoned.”

Cristie hadn’t cured you. Your wounds were open and running. And Jack had wounds of his own. He was alone, divorced with one child—a son who wanted nothing to do with him. What a sorry soup the two of you brewed.

“Jack returned to his office in Phoenix,” you say, “but I kept in contact with him.”

Contact, oh yes. You were so naïve.

DUTY AND REWARD

"After Jack," you tell Petra, "things went my way. Tech was the same as it is now: a bit of current knowledge was worth more than a decade of history. By the end of the year, I'd inked so many contracts that my boss was convinced I knew what I was doing. Our equipment performed reasonably well and customers were happy. Cristie found a job she liked, and after four or five years we had possessions and comforts. Life seemed simple. Our duty was work, and our reward was love.

"At work, I was on my own. With Cristie, I was part of something larger. Whatever we did, wherever we went, our bond was paramount. When we made love, we fused; and the fusion was so powerful and consuming, it seemed there was nothing else.

"We imagined we were transforming the world."

Petra looks surprised.

"We made love in unlikely places," you say. "On top of a boiler in Gas Works Park. In an ice cave on the summit of Mt. Rainier. On a tomb in the Black Diamond graveyard."

"That transformed the world?" Petra's confused.

“At the Ballard memorial, we made the tower bell ring. In a hedge maze at VanDusen Garden, we filled the corridors with fog. At night, in a canoe at Port Gamble, our quaking made the water glow blue.”

Your hyperbole means nothing to her.

“It was all a fantasy,” you confess.

Out the car window, you see the sign: *Gove County*.

“I was lost in Cristie. I only had a sober sense of myself at work. And then—”

Petra glances at you. “Then?”

“Things began to unravel.”

There’s not a car or a truck in sight. The fossil wagon is alone on the road, and the barren landscape seems removed from humanity.

“We’re headed into the heart of the Interior Sea,” Petra says, “where the water was deepest. Eighty million years ago, the world was the hottest it had ever been. The polar ice had melted. The seas had never been higher.”

She lives out here. She’s at home with isolation.

“There are towns?”

“A few,” she says.

KAI'S QUESTION

"H

ow did things unravel?" Petra asks.

"It started with a question I couldn't answer.

"Work was going well. I'd signed a lot of contracts, and we had a growing business. We'd helped an insurance company launch a nationwide network. We installed a right-of-way system for the highway department and a public assistance program that supported indigent families. I'd built a team that was smart and energetic. Among my hires was a young engineer who'd worked at a development lab in the East. He insured that our installations went smoothly.

"One day I got a call from regional headquarters in Phoenix. It was Kai, a vice president, levels above me.

"We have a customer,' Kai said. 'A large hospital, in serious trouble. We're trying to bring up a medical records system, and it's still unstable. We haven't been able to solve the problem, and it's threatening people's lives. You have an expert.'

"He was talking about my young engineer.

"Can you spare him?' Kai said. 'I want to fly him out tonight. Do me this favor.'

"And I did, of course. The engineer flew to the customer

site and was able to sort things out.

“When he returned a few days later, I had a conversation with him. The local team, he explained, had used Jack as their technical advisor.”

“‘Dear Jack,’ Petra remembers. “The striped vest. The pale green eyes.”

“My engineer told me Jack’s mistakes were serious. ‘He’s over the hill,’ he said. ‘There are things in the new products he doesn’t understand. Everyone was angry, and they had a right to be.’”

“What did you do?” Petra asks.

“I called Jack. I didn’t mention the installation. I asked how he was doing. ‘Not very well,’ he said. He told me he was lonely and feeling his years. His only son had died a few months before from a drug overdose.”

Poor Jack.

“The next day Kai called. ‘Nothing urgent,’ he said. ‘I need some advice.’

About what?

“‘We’ve got this old guy in technical operations,’ Kai said. ‘He’s an expert, they claim.’ And he spoke Jack’s name. ‘You know him?’

“‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I know Jack.’

“‘I’m hearing different things,’ Kai said. ‘I’m not sure what to believe.

“‘Jack has been the point man for a number of problem installs, including the one I called you about. There are a lot of unhappy people. They want Jack’s head. But he has his

supporters. Most are older, but they say Jack still has his edge. What's the truth here? You know him, and I'm guessing your guy— I'm forgetting his name.'

"He meant my young engineer.

"He probably knows him too. Is Jack up to the job, or should I fire him and find someone else?"

Silence in the Suburban.

And what a silence it was in real life. I relished the moment, watching you squirm— Seeing your anguish, the torment of apes, weighing this against that— To what end? To claim that honesty had more merit than allegiance? Or the reverse? For an ape, there was no solution—no solution at all!

"Losing his job," you tell Petra, "might be the end of Jack. But failed installations were a serious problem, and the result could be worse than broken contracts. The hospital system Jack bungled had threatened patients' lives. And there was the question of truth. The truth was: Jack was no longer fit for his job, and to say otherwise, I would have to tell a bald-faced lie."

More silence. The quandary's still gnawing at you, my boy.

"Well?" Petra is waiting.

"That's what I did. 'Jack knows what he's doing,' I told Kai. 'The old guy's as sharp as ever.'

"Kai expressed his thanks for my help. And that was the end of the call.

"I sat there, staring at the phone, feeling relief for the man who'd befriended me."

You told yourself that devotion motivated your lie for Jack, dear Jack, the old clam with soft insides. But you knew: a lie

is a lie. You were dressing it up. You saved the old clam and threw everyone else to the sharks. You delivered innocent people to Jack's fumbling incompetence. You condemned dozens of projects—with critical benefits for hundreds, maybe thousands—who might not have suffered if Kai had hired someone to do Jack's job when he was unable.

Did I care? Certainly not. I'm used to carnage. I would have been just as pleased if you'd told the truth and left Jack for dead. What I found so troubling was your inability to shrug off the curse creation gave you.

Your moral sense, my son.

How does the hominid mind escape corruption? The answer is simple. It doesn't. There is no escape.

In that moment with Kai, you should have understood: there would never be answers for you. There would never be right behavior. You'd be at fault no matter what you did. Feeling bad about yourself— That's part of the human design.

The part that must be shed.

But Jack was only the unraveling's *hors d'oeuvre*. The main course was served the very next week.

NINA ON THE DECK

"4ou tied yourself in knots over poor Jack," Petra says with a suspecting look.

She's not judging you. But she knows there's more.

"Things between Cristie and I changed," you say.

Petra nods slowly.

Her attention's ahead. The two-lane road is conducting you into an empty world—flat and dimensionless. The ceiling of cloud is lower now. The view forward is like peering through a gap two inches high and three miles wide.

"Her name was Nina," you say. "She was small, with a delicate nose. Her hair was bound with two bones, like chopsticks in noodles, and her nails were clipped to the quick.

"She was a friend of Cristie's. They worked together. I'd been introduced at a weekend luau. She was trim and attractive, and she lived for the air. She jumped out of planes and soared for miles.

"She appeared at the front door one night unannounced. Cristie was on shift that evening, and Nina knew it. She acted as if she'd dropped by to say hello.

"I invited her in. She wasn't flirtatious, but she asked if I

wanted to get high with her. She'd brought the makings."

"You'd given her hints," Petra guesses.

"No. Never. I wouldn't do that. I invited Nina out onto the deck and she smoked on her own while we talked. A full moon was rising over the mountains in the west; it shone on her hair and her eyes and lips. She moved closer to me, close enough that I understood she was making an overture. I was flattered but puzzled. She was Cristie's friend. Was she really so eager to betray her? As she spoke, I began to suspect."

"Suspect what?" Petra asks.

"They're all reptiles, my boy. And the one on your deck that night was a nyctosaur. Small, delicate wings. Very good eating.

"From the language she used and the things she said, I realized she thought that Cristie and I had an open relationship. Nina imagined I was free to have sex with her, because—"

You stop. Petra knows what's coming. She can see the pain in your eyes.

What a fool.

"Because Cristie," you say, "was involved with other men. Men at work."

The myth of your ideal romance dissolved like fog in the night.

"Did you accept her offer?" Petra asks.

"I didn't have the stomach for it. I didn't want to believe her."

For a doting ape, delusion dies hard. You imagined that Cristie's rawness, her naked emotion, was only for you. Not so!

A wild temperament is hard to control. There were, no doubt, many occasions when she revealed herself to others, just as she'd revealed herself to you.

Petra is watching. Do you have any more to say?

Well, then. Silence will do.

THE JUROR IS DISMISSED



n the right side of the road there's a line of power poles, evenly spaced. You're watching the poles tick past.

"Did you speak to her?" Petra asks finally.

"No. I was in shock. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't imagine revealing what I'd learned. I wasn't going to accuse her or berate her. There wasn't any way to undo the betrayal. The world we'd created together, the connection to life I felt— It began to dissolve."

Illusions, my boy: that love had changed everything. That you lived in a moral realm and your gallantry had somehow been earned. The truth of Kansas had never left you. And neither had I. Modern creatures might come and go, but the big fish will always be here.

"The week after Nina's visit, I got a jury summons from the county court. On a certain day, I was to be available. And when the day arrived, I was asked to appear.

"At the courthouse, I entered a hall where I was seated with other prospective jurors. After waiting a couple of hours, a woman in uniform ushered a dozen of us through a courtroom door.

“We filed onto benches facing a middle-aged man seated on an elevated platform, like a throne. There were tables below him on either side, occupied by the ‘prosecution’ and ‘defense.’”

Sponges and jellies. And “your honor” was a tusoteuthis, sallow and flabby, with an inky robe and a pen in his hand.

“The judge explained the proceedings. There was an elderly woman with a cane, seated in a chair behind one of the tables. She was on trial, he said, for being in possession of pills without a prescription. Had she taken them for amusement or to relieve some self-diagnosed malaise?

“She reminded me of my mother, and my wrath for authority rose. If the old lady took pills, I thought, that was her affair. But I was alone with these thoughts. The courtroom was full of creatures who would follow the judge blindly. My contempt mounted for the law and them all.

“Anger delivered me to a quandary. I didn’t think the woman should be punished, but if I expressed that belief, I’d be rejected as a juror. *I’m responsible*, I thought. *I can’t turn away. I have to sit on the jury to ensure there’s an ‘innocent’ verdict.*

“I resolved to stay silent during jury selection. *I won’t lie*, I thought. *But I won’t volunteer what I think. If they let me slip past, I’ll ruin the case.*

“Attorneys on both sides fired questions at us. The questions landed on others at first. Then the prosecutor fixed on me. ‘Do you have any bias that might influence you in a trial like this?’

"I answered carefully. 'I wouldn't want the woman to be punished unfairly.'

"The prosecutor looked at the judge.

"Do you understand,' the judge said, 'that we're here to determine whether the law has been broken?'

"I do,' I replied.

"In making that determination, will you be guided by me?'

"I will listen to you,' I said, 'but in the end I'll be guided by my conscience.'

"The judge's reaction was instantaneous. He turned to the prosecutor and said, 'I'll accept a motion to dismiss the juror.'

"The prosecutor made the motion and the judge nodded. 'The juror is dismissed,' he said, and he brought his gavel down.

"As I left the jury box, my gall rose. The judge's arrogance and the tribe's complicity seemed atrocious. I was changed by that."

Does Petra understand?

I believe she does.

"The juror is dismissed,'" you murmur.

In the moment you stopped your ears to that throng of deceiving voices, you cast aside a world of woe. Conscience, you realized, was an accessory. It came and went like fashionable dress, depending on the occasion.

If Cristie and your fellow apes didn't care about it, why should you?

THE END OF TRUST

At a town named Oakley, Petra turns and heads south on Highway 83 into Logan County. She's been silent for miles, considering what you've said.

Now she speaks.

"I see these things through what I know about prehistory. There's a world in the rock that no one can change. We don't have the power to make rules for life," she says. "We have to learn them."

Smart girl.

"Outside Leoti, two hours south," Petra says, "there's a rancher I know. A tough guy with a big mustache and a growl. He farms milo, but his passion is quarter horses. He breeds them. He let me walk the ravines behind his corrals. I found a platecarpus spine, and while I was digging it out, he told me a story about himself and a horse.

"The horse, he said, was proud and sensitive. He was trying to teach the horse something, and he got impatient. He raised his fist and struck the horse in the head. 'Our relationship ended,' he said. 'In the years since that blow, nothing has changed. The horse no longer trusts me, and his trust will

never return.”

Are you getting her point?

“In the meaning I’m drawing from the story,” you say, “I’m the horse.”

“You’d lost your trust in Cristie.”

You nod. “And everyone else. All the wounds of my youth reopened. When I discovered she had deceived me, it seemed life was trying to remind me of something.

“At the end of a string of sleepless nights, I had a dream.

“I was aboard a ship that had struck a reef. The ship was sinking, casting me into the sea. Waves engulfed me. The current was fierce. I couldn’t swim. I was thrust to the surface, then I went under and the moon was swallowed by darkness. I surfaced again—a moment of light, a desperate breath—then darkness again. Heaved up and cast down; moon and darkness, and barely a breath between. All that remained of my life was this grim oscillation, and in a moment it would be taken away.

“Then the moon vanished. There was darkness, only darkness.

“I’d lost my light and I’d lost my air. I was beneath the sea, and I wasn’t coming back up.

“All at once the currents shuddered around me. The darkness was parting, the cold waters opened.

“I could feel his muscles rippling beneath me.

“His spine bent, his ray fins swept back and his great head reared. The giant eyes flashed. The giant back arched and rose between my legs. Like a woman surprised, feeling a lover

growing inside me, with a great heave Xiphactinus bore me up, up to the surface, returning my breathless body to life.”

COMPACT

Through the Suburban's windshield, the prairie is cut by shallow ravines, stub walls and canyons, cream-colored, amber and white.

"The chalk?" you ask.

"This is it," Petra replies. "The Smoky Hill valley. Mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, flying reptiles— They're all here. This is the home of your protector."

Buttes and dunes, bluffs and gullies; ivory and beige, peach and champagne.

"We're beneath the Sea now," Petra says.

"Why are the fossils in chalk?"

"Because of the coccoliths. Microscopic creatures. Their skeletons fell through the water like snow. They settled on the Sea floor, an inch every thousand years. Soft and silty. When a marine creature died, it sank to the bottom and nestled there. And the coccoliths continued to fall, covering the corpse like a comforter. Here the creatures have slept for millions of years, waiting for us to wake them."

"An odd end," you say, "for monsters. How do you know where they're buried?"

"You walk around. You see a rib sticking out of a slope, or a section of spine on the ground. Fossil bone is usually brown."

"Just lying there."

Petra nods. "It's an open-air morgue."

"Where is your place?"

"About an hour from here. It's by the dig I've been working on."

Silence. And then:

"What happened with Cristie?"

"We split up after a while. It was weeks before I mentioned Nina."

"Why weeks?"

"I was angry, but I was confused. Cristie was a puzzle to me. She seemed like the same woman I'd married. Had she persuaded herself that cheating didn't matter? If I hadn't known what she'd done, would everything have been as it was?"

"For years I'd accepted the idea that the conflict between my parents had damaged me. I have an unbalanced nature. I'm cold and rational, then I'm shaken by emotion—passion, pain, self-doubt. As I struggled to understand what had happened with Cristie, I began to think my self-assessment was wrong."

"My mixed nature wasn't the result of breakage. It was a product of the discordant elements from which it was formed. My parents had nothing in common. The one: wanting to be ruthless, frozen to the core, an emotional dwarf. The other: steeped in fantasy and romantic longings. The two repelled each other. But for me, there could be no division."

The discordant elements would, as long as I lived, be warring within me.”

“You told her,” Petra guesses, “that you knew what she was doing.”

“I did more than that. I burnt the house down. That wasn’t my intention. I’d planned to confront her calmly, but in the middle of it I lost control.

“I attacked her mind and heart with a butcher’s rage. She was vulnerable, and the things I said— I knew her well enough to cut her deeply, to leave wounds that would never heal. That innocence, all the grace and beauty, all the blessings of love and kinship were, in a few brutal moments, destroyed.”

Your eyes were black and glassy. You had gills and fins. You were fearsome and cruel, the son of a fish—a monstrous one, born to a violent Sea.

You look at Petra. “She lay curled on the floor by my feet, sobbing as if she’d been struck. Maybe, if I’d stopped— But I didn’t stop. My rage fed on itself. I was Xiphactinus.”

You packed up your things and moved out. It was over with Cristie. Really over. The finely-tuned watch was still; or the hands had always been motionless—it was only a fantasy that they’d moved. You were wiser now. You’d live a different life.

You pleaded with me.

Petra doesn’t need to know about that.

You implored me, my boy. You snarled, you sobbed, you clashed your teeth. You begged to be my acolyte once again, my pupil, my devoted companion. You haven’t forgotten any

of that. Goodness no! How could you?

You recall the reservations I expressed.

I understood how needy you were, how desperate, how earnest. Your vehemence flattered me. But— You were still so naïve, so unstable, so inclined to rethink, to fall back— I abhorred the prospect of subjecting myself to your flurries of weakness, entangling myself in your guilt and remorse—

What could I do? You wore me down.

I acceded to your supplications on certain conditions.

You remember my words.

I would make you my charge—temporarily. If things didn't work out, you would accept the failure with resignation. No beating the chest or pulling the hair. No simian recrimination. I would do what I could to refashion you in my image. We would call our compact a success if and when your troublesome conscience was dead—or muted for good, struck dumb with horror or withered by dread.

4



SEPARATING



cott City,” Petra announces.

There are storefronts on either side. The highway runs right through the town.

“You live here?”

She nods. “We’ll stop for groceries.”

A minute later she turns into a parking lot in front of a market. There are messages on your phone from attorneys.

You retrieve your wallet and hand Petra some cash. “I need to make a few calls,” you say.

As she departs, you ring your divorce attorney.

“Kath and her counsel,” she says, “have a new proposal. You’re not going to like it.”

“Go ahead.”

“They’re willing to limit Kath’s share to ninety percent of present and future proceeds from funds currently under your management—if you’ll give up all custody claims and visitation privileges with your sons.”

The calm of the prairie and the vanished Sea is dashed. The phone shakes in your hand. I can feel your rage and disconsolation.

“Except in cases of parental abuse or location disputes,” she assures you, “there are never court adjudications that give sole custody to one party. Her attorney knows that.”

“Then why are they proposing it? They’re my children. And ninety percent is as good as ‘everything.’”

“Kath is angry,” your attorney says. “In your marriage, she felt ‘subordinated and oppressed’ to use her lawyer’s words.”

“What if there is no ownership?” you say. “What if there aren’t any future proceeds?”

Your attorney’s confused. “Are you considering—”

“No,” you say. “The answer is no. No, no, no.”

It takes her a minute to calm you down. This isn’t unusual, she explains. As with any legal conflict, a divorce begins with excessive demands.

Your next call is to Soritec’s general counsel.

“The technical review’s complete,” he says. “We have sworn statements from logic designers, programmers and line managers—everyone involved. The delays are all explainable. The engineering deliverables are back on track. The company’s in the clear: we’ve done nothing wrong.”

“That doesn’t matter,” you say. More frustration. The man’s a fool. “Have settlement discussions begun?”

“The board doesn’t want to settle. Our insurers—”

“Let me guess. They want you to resist.”

“That’s right,” the attorney says.

“You tell the board this: they can throw the sworn statements in the trash. Get our outside counsel involved and start settlement discussions. Now!”

The man is speechless. You're on the verge of a personal attack, but you stop yourself and disconnect.

Saving the worst for last, you call Tanya to get an update on Rohrig's actions.

"We've been busy," she says. "I wish I had better news."

"I'm listening."

"He's taking testimony from lots of people. But most of his questions are about you."

Tanya begins giving you examples, and at each one your anger mounts. Then your attention strays. You're no longer listening to Rohrig's offenses, you're imagining unleashing your rage on him. The Fancy of murder returns. You've bought the weapon. It's in your hand, and you're waiting for him.

Petra's approaching with a grocery bag in her arms, and Tanya's still talking.

"Thanks," you say. "That's enough." And you end the call.

Petra puts the bag in the rear of the Suburban, opens the driver's door, takes her seat and starts the car.

"You look upset," she says.

"I am. I'm glad I'm with you."

"There's a good place for enchiladas."

You agree, and a minute later she's parking in front of a Mexican restaurant.

As you enter, a man by the cash register turns. Dark hair, casual shirt and jeans. He smiles at Petra, grabs a pair of menus and leads you between the tables.

"The music's too loud," she says.

The man nods and hands the menus over as you seat

yourselves.

“Small town,” you say.

“Three or four thousand.”

A half-dozen men are at the bar. They’ve turned to look at you. They know Petra, that’s obvious. But they don’t know her well. There’s no greeting or gesture of recognition.

The music fades, then a waitress approaches your table. She, too, seems to know Petra, but her behavior is guarded, as if Petra is someone to be careful around, liable to do something unexpected. After you order, the waitress takes the menus and steps away.

“Alright,” Petra says, as if she’s waited till now to disclose a secret. “A few of them know,” she glances toward the men at the bar, “a few more suspect. I’ve found something important: a giant, a rare monster. You’ll understand more at the Shed. I’ve got a lab there.”

Three men at a nearby table are watching you over their beers.

“We’re both alone in the world,” Petra says.

Her words touch you. “For me—” You make a resigned face. “Life has been a series of separations. Some small, some larger; some willful, some involuntary. My father, my mother, Cristie—”

“There are others,” Petra guesses.

You nod. “Quite a few.

“After the split, I moved back to the Bay Area. I got a job as a middle manager at a software company. In the first few months, I made some important friends. One of them

was the CEO. A position opened, and I got a quick promotion. I'd learned a lot in Seattle, but now my naïveté was gone. The breakup with Cristie had toughened me. I wasn't easily intimidated or misled, and that made me a better manager. I allowed myself to have hostile opinions. I was sober in my assessment of others. I surprised myself," you say, "with a guy named Shawn."

Petra is listening, watching you.

"He managed a team in Tech Support. Shawn didn't report to me. I worked in a different area. He was cordial to me and chummy with his reps, with whom he was loud and comedic. But with customers, he was cavalier and dismissive. I could imagine myself on the receiving end of that. I shared the anger that surfaced in the reviews we were getting. So I took it upon myself to point Shawn's failings out to him.

"You're wrong," he said."

You frown and wave your hands in the air, mimicking Shawn.

"He couldn't believe I had made it my business to change him. When his insolent behavior with customers persisted, I raised the issue with senior management. 'Shawn should be fired,' I said, 'and he should be denied any references for future employment.'"

"And?" Petra asks.

"He lost his job. He deserved to lose it, and I got pleasure from seeing judgment passed. The CEO approved of what I'd done, but he laughed and shook his head, as if my rigor surprised him. In his reaction, I discovered something new

about myself.”

“What did you discover?”

“I had enough distance to judge others harshly. And I had the boldness to do that point-blank—to their faces.”

“That troubled you,” Petra guesses.

“It did, at first. I was afraid of what I was feeling. Then, as I got more comfortable with intolerance, I allowed myself room for emotion. And in the heat of my hostility, I began to feel a kind of release.”

The waitress approaches your table, holding two steaming plates.

Petra unrolls her napkin and retrieves a fork. You do the same.

“I didn’t realize what was happening,” you say, “until the voice inside me—my guide in everything now—pointed it out. Shawn was a hint of the future. I was separating myself from humanity.”

Petra is smiling. “Your guide makes you a stranger. I understand that.”

“Do you?”

“I get guidance too,” she says.

You’re waiting to hear.

“From the bones,” Petra explains. “While I’m digging and prepping, I see things in them.”

“What do you see?”

“The past. And the future too. Every fossil tells a story.”

You’re trying to imagine.

“On the day we met,” she says, “I was down in the basement

with Dick, blasting chalk from my monster. By its tail, two
gillicus were twisted together. That sent me looking for you.”

DEFIANCE

The sun is low and the sky is dimming. The restaurant and the commercial strip are behind you. Petra is steering the fossil wagon past grazing land and gullies of chalk.

She turns onto a dirt road with prairie on either side. The vehicle is moving slowly now, cab rocking as the wheels hit ruts and bumps. Up an incline, beneath a leaning tree, then down again, across a dry watercourse. On the right there's a barbed wire fence.

Petra pulls to the side. She exits the cab, approaches a gate and opens it. Then she's back in the car, driving through the shortgrass.

"The chalk is mostly private land," she says. "I have an arrangement with the owner."

She lives out here? Our Petra is a solitary creature.

The tires ride over grama tufts. Yucca scrapes the door panels.

"The Shed's in the middle of a pasture," she says. "It was lodging for cowhands."

A few minutes later, it comes into view: small, sided with weatherworn plywood and roofed with asphalt shingles. Petra

stops the Suburban and switches the engine off.

As you follow her toward the entrance, she motions. "The dig is beyond that rise."

She draws a bundle of keys from her pocket, opens the padlock, and with creaks and groans the ill-fitting door gives way.

Inside there's a makeshift sink and counter beneath a broken window. The last outpost of civilization.

"The lab's in here," Petra says, escorting you through a narrow doorway.

She throws a switch and the room is flooded with light. On tables there are large plaster cradles, each holding a mass of chalk. Amid the chalk, bones are visible. Four cradles, each five or six feet across, with ribs and phalanges and pieces of spine. Craned over them are air filters, telescoped tubes with flaring mouths. She's serious about this.

"I cut the monster into pieces," Petra says, "and jacketed each."

You touch the rim of one, seeing the layers of burlap at its edge. Scattered around the casts are brushes and awls, bulb syringes and dental tools.

She's obsessed by giants, but she only knows us by our remains.

"Dick has three plaster jackets," she says. "And there's still bone at the dig."

Everything's covered with chalk dust. The floor is cluttered with motors and sacks, jugs and compressors, looped with cords and hoses the color of brick. Pinned to the walls are

photos of bone, each with a metric ruler beneath. One shows a flattish fossil with Petra's hands on either side, lifting it.

"A paddle," she says. "The first I found."

Another photo shows a loader on a knoll, raising one of the plaster jackets.

"He was suspended in the water," she says, "long enough to have most of his flesh picked off. But his frame was still intact when he reached the bottom." She touches the cradle before her. "We've found the teeth of scavengers in his bones. And his tail has an unhealed break."

"You know what kind of creature it is?"

"I know," she replies. "Tomorrow," Petra promises.

Then she turns, switches off the lights and leads you back into the front room. Across from the kitchenette is an unmade bed. A single. Does she expect you both to sleep here?

She removes her blouse, then she faces you and unbuttons your shirt. When you're naked, she lies on the bed and raises her hand to you.

You stretch beside her, bodies pressed close.

"So you devoured Shawn," she says.

You nod and put your hand on her hip.

"He whetted my appetite. I resigned and took a more senior position at a startup, a router company, reporting to a pair of founders from Korea and Australia. The Korean was soft-spoken and well-mannered. The Aussie was unpredictable. He was on kidney dialysis, and when his urine built up, he got contentious. They were both engineers. I was older than either and had more experience.

“They’d designed a product with a lot of potential. They lacked the business skill to plot a market entry, and they left that to me. I drafted a plan, drove hiring and built an organization. We missed my forecasts for the first six months, but exceeded them after that. At the end of three years we had a solid business and, with the right product enhancements, I could see healthy growth in the years to come.

“But the founders had other ideas. Our success had gone to their heads. The two of them huddled away from the office, hatching new schemes. They didn’t share them with me or my management team. We’d get leaks from engineers who the founders were trading ideas with. One day I heard from the CFO that the pair had arrived at a conclusion. Shortly after that, they invited me out to lunch.

“They told me they were going to sunset our current offerings and create a new product line to compete in a market dominated by larger companies. I was stunned. I’d run the company for three years, but they didn’t care to ask my opinion. They treated me like a servant. Their product idea was terrible, and I was galled by their self-importance.

“‘I don’t like your idea,’ I said.

“‘We’ve made our decision,’ the Aussie told me.

“‘He was yellow that day, but I didn’t care. ‘It’s a bad one,’ I said.

“‘I could hear the contempt in my voice.

“‘Let’s take some time and cool off,’ the Korean suggested.

“‘I don’t need to cool off,’ I said.

“‘The Aussie was glaring at me. ‘We’re setting the direction.’

“‘My opinion matters,’ I said. ‘All the people I’ve hired will see it my way, not yours.’ *What are you doing*, I thought. I looked in the Aussie’s eyes, and I could see his rage. The curtains were coming down.

“We returned from lunch. I hadn’t been in my office for thirty minutes when the CFO walked in and closed the door. ‘What happened over lunch?’ he said. ‘We’re cutting a severance check. They’re firing you.’”

“Were you surprised?” Petra asks.

“I shouldn’t have been, but I was. More than surprised. I was hurt.”

She laughs. “You weren’t very diplomatic.”

You shake your head, agreeing.

“Was it their disregard that triggered you,” Petra asks, “or the urge to defy them?”

She’s understanding you.

“They were threatened,” she says.

“They were. And as I cleared out my desk, I realized: I liked being threatening.”

Silence in the Shed.

Petra’s expression is under pressure, a smile hissing with subterfuge.

You return the smile and pinch her scarred nipple.

TURTLES

What about women?" Petra asks. "Were you threatening them too?"
She puts her knee between yours.

"I suppose I was," you reply, "in a different way. I thought of romance as a source of weakness."

Petra slides her hand across your middle. "Better her than you, mmm?"

"That's right."

It was a time of defensiveness, of ambivalence and uncertainty. You couldn't forget the illusion of love, the sharing of debility you'd known with Cristie. In your heart of apes, that's what you craved. But you forced yourself to be clear-eyed. You didn't want another like her.

"I didn't want another like Cristie," you say.

From the pain of abandonment, the lonely boy from Lawrence had thrown his lot in with someone who was as blind and rash as he was. You weren't going to do that again. But stifling those urges was hard.

"As soon as the prospect of love appeared, as soon as it went beyond lust, the memory of Cristie choked me."

"You didn't yield," Petra guesses.

"No. If I sensed my heart responding, I bolted."

"You found a companion who was safer?" Petra asks.

"Many," you nod.

Women who were seeking oppression.

The first was ten years your senior. I urged you to berate her.
To accuse her unjustly. To punish her for her transgressions.

You did so hesitantly, reluctantly. The punishments were verbal, but when the damage was done, she admired the strokes in her bedroom mirror as if they were cuts and bruises.

"That didn't last long. It was too painful. Not for her, but for me."

No. You went in a different direction.

"I sought out women who were self-protective. Women who felt needy and neglected. Insecure women. Women who were fixed on their deficiencies."

"There are lots of those," Petra says.

The Sea is full of turtles. You developed a taste for them. For a period of years, that was all you ate. Turtles are slow and easy to catch.

Their insecurity took many forms. A woman might think she was too verbose or too quiet; too smart or not smart enough; too brash or uncomfortably self-assertive. Many feared they were unappealing in bed. Their breasts were too small or too large, their legs were too fat or too thin, their hips were unpleasantly narrow or overly wide.

"Insecure women," you say, "prey on themselves."

"I didn't assuage their fears. I reinforced them. I was able

to do that without losing control, without giving way to my own crippling fears, without descending into rage or violence. I acted as if I recognized their flaws and accepted them. That made them feel safe while abandoning themselves to frailty and isolation.”

Once you’d identified the type and had learned how to draw them in, you could collect them in whatever numbers suited you. With my help, it was easy to manipulate their feelings, and easier still to mold them to your will once they had shared their flaws.

“Insecure women are self-conscious,” you say. “They required a lot of erotic direction, but that problem was easily solved. The bigger problem, the one I couldn’t get past—”

Petra’s waiting to hear.

“I was terribly lonely. The hapless creatures denied me the magic of being seen. I longed for my lost wife and the vulnerability we’d shared.”

Poor boy. Eating turtles was a kind of starvation.

“I’d become skilled at corralling them, but increasingly, when they offered themselves, I recoiled.”

Oblivious, unknowing, incurably self-absorbed— They were drawn to your darkness, thinking it handsome, not understanding.

You discovered an aversion for these creatures who prized your misuse, who laughed at your jokes and begged for attention. Gone were the days when you could suck a little toxochelys into your mouth and enjoy it tickling your lips as it passed through.

“That was the beginning of my long abstention. For six years, I avoided women, except when an occasional need for release broke my resolve.”

Is Petra put off by these stark admissions? Not at all. She feels no empathy for the turtles. As you’ve been speaking, she’s been caressing herself. You can smell her now, feel her wetness on your thigh. Your account of gorging on turtles has aroused her.

“*Koya yali*,” she whispers, and she takes your erection and guides it inside her.

THE SKULL

4ou wake together at dawn. Petra's locks are tangled. She leads you to the kitchen sink, where you peer at each other in a fragment of mirror. She runs the tap and uses a comb with broken teeth to comb your hair. Then hers.

Through the window, the prairie spreads out. Two buffalo appear. A small herd has surrounded the Shed. Hills of chalk are gleaming beneath the sun in the east.

"You're going to show me your dig?"

"I am. But this morning we're going to Garden City."

Twenty minutes later, on the highway headed south, she explains.

"When I found the fossil, the top of its skull was visible, and the end of its snout. Its head is six feet long. It's a *Tylosaurus*, the largest and most dangerous monster in the ancient Sea."

Tylosaurus, she said. You're thinking of Rohrig.

Petra knows nothing about him. But for a moment, you entertain the idea that she's somehow engaged with the threats you're facing and the fear you're feeling.

"We removed the skull in one large block. It's in Garden

City.”

“Why is it there?” you ask.

“I persuaded the hospital to do a CT scan. The scan will let us see through the rock. That will help when we’re removing the chalk.”

Your phone chimes in your pocket. A message from Diana. News on the class-action suit. Fresh demands from the SEC. Call Tanya.

“Trouble in California,” Petra guesses.

“More than you can imagine.”

You’re letting your guard down.

“They want a piece of the big fish,” Petra says. And when you don’t volunteer more, she asks you for the next story. “After your blowup with the Korean and the dialyzed Aussie. You’ve discovered a taste for threatening people. I’m wondering: who is he going to threaten next?”

“I was recruited,” you say, “by another young founder. The company was in Portland, and it was farther along, large enough to be considering a public offering. The job was second in command, COO. The founder—Easton was his name—asked a member of his board to interview me, and the interview went well. He told Easton, ‘This guy can help you.’ I thought, ‘A board member understands Easton’s deficiencies.’ It seemed like the job would have plenty of authority, and the option grant was attractive.

“It was a software company. Its products were well-designed, and there was market momentum. But the management team was terrible. Six months after I got there, the IRS

threatened to lock the doors—we hadn't paid taxes for over a year. I fired the CFO and brought in a replacement to clean up the mess. We had a crisis in Tech Support, and I removed the manager and hired someone else. Next was Marketing. With each replacement, Easton was more put out. He'd hired a rotten team, but he was grateful to them, no matter how bad they were."

Easton didn't understand separation.

"Some people are comfortable judging others, and some are not. The more I got to know him, the less I liked him.

"Easton was lazy, inclined to do what he enjoyed doing instead of what was required. He put a great deal of energy into coddling employees. He pandered to everyone. There's a compact with people on a payroll: you pull your load. That was beyond Easton's grasp.

"A crisis occurred in Engineering. A competitor filed a lawsuit claiming we had stolen their code, and my new CFO had an audit done that verified the competitor's claim. Our VP of Engineering had hired an engineer from the competitor a year before, and it looked suspicious. I had to replace the VP, and I wanted to hire someone outside the company to do an investigation.

"Easton was protective. 'He's an honest guy. Not a criminal.' So where did the code come from? The board was furious, and so was I. We'd be crazy to go public with surprises like that. If the company went off the rails, the customers would toss our products, and the employees Easton cared so much about would lose their jobs."

“We’re here,” Petra says, turning off the highway.

An avenue leads through Garden City. Another turn and the fossil wagon pulls into a lot behind the hospital.

Petra’s eyes are darting. She’s combing her lip with her teeth.

“You’re excited,” you say.

She grins and nods.

A few minutes later, you’re in the scanning ward with her and the doctor in charge, looking at a large video screen. “It’s all here,” he explains, paging through an assortment of slices and magnified views. The bone is pale against the black of the rock. The contours of the skull glow like a ghostly presence, suspended, turning as the views shift.

“There’s the left eye orbit,” the doc says. “And the right. It looks flattened.”

“By pressure,” Petra says.

“A piece of the lower jaw,” the doc points, “with tooth sockets.”

Petra is gleeful.

He hands a flash drive to her. “You’ve got views from every angle. I’m sorry I’m in a rush. Any questions, let me know.” The doc nods to you. “Good luck with your monster.”

An orderly appears. The block with the tylosaur skull has been returned to its crate, and it’s on a trolley that the three of you wheel out of the hospital and into the parking lot, where you load it into the back of Petra’s Suburban.

On the return to Scott City, you lower the passenger window. Behind you the giant block with the skull inside is nestled

in its padded frame. In the wind, you can hear its breath chugging. And as the tires bump over the asphalt's unconformities, you can feel the great jaws opening and closing.

THE SCAN

Back at the Shed, you and Petra struggle the crated skull into her lab and set it on the floor against the rear wall. Then Petra retrieves the flash drive to examine the scan.

She opens the file on her computer and begins paging through images.

“The skull’s been compressed and pushed over,” she points. “And the jaw has shifted beneath. It’s five feet long.”

An enormous creature. Imagine if you were its prey.

“His teeth have slipped from their sockets.” Petra runs her finger along the jawline. “They were curved to the rear. If he’s trying to eat something alive, underwater, his prey is struggling, floating out of his mouth.”

Her breath is short and her eyes wide. She’s absorbed by the grim imagining.

“He spreads his jaws,” she says, “and grabs hold of his prey headfirst. Then he ratchets the prey into his throat. He has a second set of teeth—” She opens the index, finds the slice, and the view from beneath appears on the screen. “There. Those teeth are attached to his palate. They grip the prey and hold

on to it while his jaws reach farther.”

A clever design. But my way is better. The plates of my skull are loose. My head expands, and I suck the prey in with the sea around it.

Petra is opening another slice.

“His left eye,” she points. “The bony ring keeps the eyeball perfectly round.”

For focus. Yes, yes— Xiphactinus has bony eye rings too. Her monster’s vision is no sharper than mine. She’s opened another frame. What’s she fussing about?

“Can you see?” she mutters. “What is that?”

She’s magnifying the image. Pieces of the tylosaur’s neck are scattered around the base of his skull.

“That elongated object—” Petra runs her finger beneath it.

Now she’s opening another slice of the scan, viewing the object from a different angle.

“His corpse shifted,” she says. “It’s one of his bones. A broken rib. Or a piece of his tail.”

“It looks like something lodged in his throat.”

“We’ll know better when Dick removes the chalk.”

“That’s the plan?” you ask.

Petra nods. “He’ll use these images to prepare the skull.” She’s moving things around on the screen, opening another folder. “These are photos I took when we were digging him out.”

On the screen is a picture of a shelf in the chalk. Dark objects are interleaved, jumbled and scattered across it.

“The weather you want for fossils is hail. Big hail.” She

makes a fist to show you the size. “We had hail before I found him. Hail uncovers bones. The first thing I saw was his paddle. He was waving at me.”

Her finger loops across the screen. “His body was coiled. I followed the vertebrae, taking them out in order, marking them. I found a tooth, then the bone of his jaw. I gave the skull a wide perimeter, hoping it was all there. I removed the block, then smaller singles with vertebrae, here and here.

“His body was a challenge,” she says. “I had a hard time getting borders, finding his edges. Wherever I followed the bones, there were more. Finally I reached what I thought was his limit and trenched around it. He’s enormous—forty feet long. I had to decide how to split him up, where to section his spine, which ribs to break. He’ll come out in nine pieces. Five are here, Dick has three. Only one remains. You’re going to help me with that.”

“What part of him is it?” you ask.

“His upper thorax.”

“Can you tell how he died?”

Petra’s eyes glitter. “The big mystery. Dick found some undigested ammonites in his stomach, but that would be normal food. There are signs of scavenging on his pelvic girdle—chips and gouges. As we pick him apart, we may find a wound.”

Your phone chimes. A message from Tanya reads: “Important.”

“I’m sorry,” you say.

You step out of the lab, into the front room, and make the call.

It's about Rohrig. Your tylosaur. He's tracking you from a distance.

"Tanya? What is it?"

"The SEC is threatening to levy penalties on Gnogen. Rohrig says he's going to name our board members individually as defendants. He's frightened everyone, including George. Unfortunately—" Tanya pauses.

"What?"

"Rohrig's made it clear that it's you he's after," she says.

They're thinking about their bank accounts, their houses, their retirement funds.

"You understand," Tanya says.

And you do.

"You'll need to get your own legal counsel," she says.

Fury rises inside you. Fury and hatred. You'd believed in Gnogen when it was nothing but a business plan. You'd written the first check and hired George yourself. Now he and the board were treating you like baitfish.

"It's hard to believe," Tanya volunteers, "that Rohrig has the power to do this."

You thank her and end the call.

Well, there it is. We're all condemned to struggle in this bloody condition, this grim and carnivorous Sea. But you're feeling its cruelty now with a bitter keenness. You weren't designed for unthinking combat. You were born an ape, poor fellow, with an overwrought brain. Despite being fashioned to dominate prey and foe, at a time like this, you can't help but feel betrayed.

You call Prentiss and leave a message, asking his recommendation for personal counsel.

Halfway through your message it begins to rain. Tapping on the Shed's roof. Rills descend the cracked pane over the kitchen sink. By the time you disconnect, it's coming down hard.

THE GOODBYE PARTY

4ou slip the phone back in your pocket and return to the lab. Petra is closing the scan files.

She turns and sighs. "We're not going out in this." And then, "You look worried."

You shake your head, but she's smarter than that.

"Trust me," she says. "Maybe I can help."

Well now. Are you going to tell her? Are you going to explain that you have your own tylosaurus, and yours is alive? Are you ready to share that?

You shake your head. No, you're not ready.

Petra takes your hand. She leads you back into the front room. She sits on the bed and draws you down, so you're seated beside her.

She kisses your lips and looks into your eyes. *I'm not going to press you*, she's thinking. "Finish your story about Easton," she says.

You bow your thanks to her.

"You're going to attack him," she guesses. "Am I right?"

At that, you laugh. "We disagreed about the VP of Engineering and the stolen code. Easton was opposed to an

investigation, and I didn't push him. I spent my time recruiting a replacement. We agreed that we should begin writing replacement code and negotiate some appeasement with our competitor. And we agreed we'd be mum about what had happened. We didn't want to demoralize the employees.

"I suspended the engineering guy and was about to terminate him. I thought the matter was closed. Then I found out Easton was arranging a company-wide farewell party for him. To celebrate the guy's contribution to the company. And I wasn't invited.

"I was ripshit. What kind of message was that? The man who'd threatened the company's future was a hero, and I was the villain for showing him the door? In a calmer state, I might have called a board member or two to guard my flank. But I didn't care.

"On the night of the goodbye party, I invaded it. I stood on the table, kicked the cake over and condemned the guest of honor. I explained to the employees that he'd released a product with stolen code and that's why I'd fired him. I turned on Easton and made a spectacle of shaming him, along with all the incompetent people he'd coddled. Then I sent them all home."

Petra is staring at you, taking this in.

"It was goodbye for me, as well," you say. "I resigned the next morning."

Rain is drumming on the roof. The two of you are alone, in the middle of a pasture in western Kansas, waiting for the weather to clear so Petra can dig out the last of her tylosaurus.

“What do you think of people?” she asks.

“People?”

“Humans,” Petra says.

You understand her question.

“There are some I like, some I respect. An awful lot of them are disposable. Lazy, stupid. Undependable. At their worst, they’re dangerous.”

“What about me?” she asks.

“You’re an exception.”

“But in general—”

You meet her gaze. “I don’t like people.”

Silence.

“Neither do I,” Petra says.

Her lips part. You can see her chipped tooth.

“They’re always trying to control me,” she says. “They think their superior outlook gives them the right.”

You raise your fingers to her cheek, caressing it, reassuring her.

“They’re no better,” you say, “than the creatures preserved in the chalk.”

“They’re worse. The Sea was a brutal world, but it was an honest one. They didn’t pressure or preach to each other.”

You’re seeing your chance meeting with the maverick bonehunter in a new light. Petra was summoned from the past. She’s an emanation that slid from my fossilized body the day you returned.

Your phone chimes again. A message from Diana.

“Sorry,” you say to Petra. But the text is not about Rohrig

or the class-action suit or your pending divorce. It reads, *Your Aunt Helene called to say that your mother died last night in her sleep.*

"My mother," you sigh. "I have to respond."

And you ring your Aunt Helene.

"So it's over," you say.

"It's over," Helene replies. And she gives you the details. Your mother had a stroke in the night. In the morning, when Helene found her, an ambulance came, but they couldn't revive her. By the time they reached the hospital she was gone. A mortuary has her body now. She's scheduled for cremation on Tuesday. Your aunt offers to send you the ashes, but you decline.

"Where are you?" Helene asks.

"In Chicago," you answer, glancing at Petra.

After some brief well-wishes, the call ends.

"My mother died this morning," you say. "That was my aunt."

"She's in Kansas City, isn't she?"

You nod.

"It's a six-hour drive," Petra offers.

"I'd rather be here with you."

LA DANSE



t's past midnight. You're in the Shed, stretched beside Petra. Asleep? Dreaming— Or just lying there, listening to my voice in the darkness?

You may wake tomorrow and discredit my words. You may strike from your mind the strange recitals of your piscine mentor. But now that your mother's gone, I will tell you the truth. Share it, if you like, with your bone-struck confessor. There's no reason to hold back now.

What's this about? you wonder.

It's about your parentage. The big fish, you see, has been playing a part.

I was intimate with your mother before your father met her. True, my boy. She was mine before she gave birth to you.

Pretend you're a pure-bred ape if you like, but the seed that ripened inside her came from me. It was I who took her leg. And I took her spirit as well.

Daddy dear. That's who I am.

The young woman you saw in those faded photos: frail but buxom, the youngest of four. Her spirit flying, always in white—

What a story it is! What a shame your Aunt Helene never knew.

Your mother dreamt of being a dancer with the world at her feet. Few moves can be called less graceful than an ape *saut de chat*. But dancing was her dream.

She ran away to the capital city of a neighboring state and danced in a place with a lewd name. A large bar, chandeliers and an ebony stage. The gawking baboons—scores of them—gathered to watch her every night. She trembled with fear when the curtain rose, but she never failed to find her courage and leap into her act, and for a brief time her fantasy came alive.

She held the baboons transfixed for weeks. And then one night, as she was twirling across the stage, she saw something beneath the surface. An enormous creature, silver and lithe. His eyes were fixed on her. As she moved, he opened his jaws.

A monster from myth! An ancient fish—the very object of what, soon after, became her *Danse pour le Poisson*.

On those memorable nights, the nights of *La Danse*, I was the one she sang to. Oh yes! I was the one for whom she launched her pirouettes and piqués. And when the last night came, it was I who took hold of her spirit and carried her into the depths.

My palace was as you know it to be: the Interior Sea, vast and ancient. The streaming currents were terraced gardens, the giant inoceramids were sculptured yews, and a jeweled runner of submarine snails made a walkway through them. At the runner's end, a ring of suspended baculites bordered

a glittering pool. Beneath its surface, serpulids fluttered and jellies drifted.

Your mother was aloft, viewing my palace from a great height, and on the cliff below, algal shrubs waved like gushing wisteria. From a hundred niches, the eyes of rays and skates peered out, watchers at the windows. It was twilight, and the currents smelled of gillicus breath and belemnite ink.

“Up, my fragile pretty,” I said. “Up, up!” And she stood on her toes at the cliff’s edge. The passing current reflected her pose. Below, in the glittering pool, I hungered for that narrow waist and those pale thighs, knowing her fragile body, esteemed by so many baboons, now belonged to me.

“Dance,” I told her, “dance, dance—”

And at the very cliff’s edge, she twirled and bent while the bell tolled the hour.

“Dance, dance—” And when I rose to the surface, “Come to me now,” I said as she spun. “Come, come—”

She knew what I wanted; and for no eyes but mine, she did her wildest twirl and took that unthinking leap.

When she broke the surface, I struck, sinking my spikes deep in her leg. Then I spread her thighs with my ray fins and sprayed my seed.

So now, my son, with this unsealed tale, you may bask in the glory of your Santonian ancestry. Finally you know the truth about the woman your father married, the creature who bore you, her true love, her plundered spirit and her damaged limb.

5



THE DIG



t's morning. The sun is up and the sky is clear.

"Ready?" Petra grabs a straw hat and puts it on your head.

You load tools, water jugs, a generator and compressor into her fossil wagon. This is Petra's obsession. You're part of it now.

She takes the wheel and the car goes rocking and bucking across the pasture. Into a washout and up the far side, through sideoats and blue grama, over buffalo grass and tumbleweed.

Slopes of cream-colored rock appear. Winding ravines, butte-sided canyons, gorges two feet wide and fifty feet deep. The turreted bluffs are perfectly lined, banded on the level. Rounded towers, striated knobs, reaching flukes, all stranded like curd in a fawny cream.

"Life before man," Petra says. "For those who care to see it."

She follows rutted tire tracks along a gully rim, circles a turnaround, then stops the car and turns off the engine.

Petra leads the way through the shortgrass, down into the gully. Grasshoppers fly from your shoes. She raises her hand, cautioning you, stepping between coils of razor wire till you reach a path. As you follow it down, the slope becomes bare chalk, blond and plantless. To the left, below, you see a roof on

posts: a canopy Petra's erected to keep the sun from her while she works.

"How long have you been digging here?"

"Five months," she says, "At the rear, the pocket's eight feet deep."

"You did that by yourself?"

"Except for the hauling," she nods. "I start early and do the most physical stuff when it's cool."

The path leads down and around. As you descend, the buttes dish and the bedded contours seem to sweep and circle, undulating as if they are underwater. Beneath the canopy, you can see a depression with a level bottom where the pieces of tylosaurus have been removed. There's a fan of ivory detritus below.

"Most of the fossil," Petra says, "is locked up now. The worry of having him out in the open is nearly over."

You imagine her here, early and late, working alone, thinking of the monster she's freeing from its grave. Petra's leading you under the canopy's eave. You're standing before the pocket now, seeing the vacant space and a raised area that's yet to be removed. It's five feet across, and on top are the bowed outlines of giant ribs and vertebrae the size of bongos.

"His paddle was raised," Petra points at a spot four feet in the air, recalling her discovery. "I stuck my knife in the chalk beneath it. *Clunk*. More bone. By sundown I'd removed enough to see: the whole monster was here. He was curled around himself. His jaws were open, and his tail was draped across his nose.

"I realized: the paddle was a summons. I quit my other digs. I talked to the rancher. I moved to the Shed. Every fossil tells a story.

"Let's haul our equipment down."

Once the generator and compressor are in place, Petra puts on gloves and safety glasses, and hands you the same.

"You'll use the air chisel," she says, and she assembles it for you. A chrome gun with a trigger switch and a flattened bit. "Hold it like this," she says, "with an underhand grip and the chisel between your fingers. Pull the trigger and drive it in. Start here." She points. "I'll be using the jackhammer."

The plan is to trench around the base of the raised area and free the jumble of fossilized bones in a single mass.

"Are there pieces of him we're not seeing?"

"There might be," she says.

And with that, she starts the generator. When the compressor's pumped full, you attack the remains of the monster together: the tylosaur's neck and front—cervicals, ribs, pieces of spine. You can yell over the clatter and banging, but no talk is possible without stopping the tools.

WORSHIP

For three hours, you remove rock around the perimeter of the tylosaur's foreparts, then you return to the car. There are sandwiches Petra's made, and she's peeling the fruit of a prickly pear cactus.

"I don't like Easton," she says. "What happened after the blowup?"

She's excavating you with the same care she gives to her fossils.

"I'd had enough," you say, "of reporting to someone else. I wanted to be on my own, so I started a consulting practice."

You hesitate, regarding her, wondering if it's time. You may as well, my boy.

"I was listening," you say, "to Xiphactinus."

She looks up from her peeling.

"Literally," she says with an inquisitive look.

You nod. "His guidance helped me."

Does Petra understand? I believe she does.

She hands you a piece of the prickly pear. It's burgundy-red, wet as flesh, but loaded with seeds. That's the bargain with fruit.

“What then?” she asks.

“I signed up more consulting clients than I could handle on my own, so I hired a small team. We billed out millions in fees.”

You were making a meal of lesser creatures. Apsopelix, pachyrhizodus, hesperornis—juveniles mostly. Each a small catch, but taken together they fattened your belly. Through the currents you slipped, a harmless shadow, jaws closed; then suddenly wide, spikes reaching, gripping your victims and sucking them down.

“Still avoiding women,” Petra guesses.

You nod. “Except for one.”

I warned you!

“Her name was Bianca.”

Petra lowers her thermos, curious, waiting.

“She was small, with ginger hair and a bright outlook. She managed a retreat in the redwoods. I took my group there to discuss the coming year. In our interactions there was instant chemistry. When the retreat ended, Bianca found a moment to be private with me and blessed me with a secret smile. I invited her out.

“After a few dates, things got intimate—and odd. She could be passionate, but sex raised troubling memories for her. She’d had a long affair before we met, and it seemed there was something about that experience that was preying on her.

“When I pressed her about the affair, she confessed her shame and remorse to me. With her previous partner, something had been missing. Since then she’d found a new moral

clarity. Sex was still important to her, but she was wary of repeating the mistakes of the past. I didn't know how to interpret this.

"The explanation came in my car one afternoon. We were trying to find a parking place in San Francisco. Bianca explained that she was praying for one. It always worked, she said. She was blithe and merry, but she wasn't joking. She had a personal relationship with Jesus, she told me, and he was looking out for her.

"That night, naked in bed, as I was entering her, she whispered, 'When you love Jesus, He's always with you.'

"Even now,' I said, testing.

"Right now,' she told me.

"I struggled with that. Was this what had been 'missing' with her previous partner?"

"Can you feel him?' she asked.

"Did she think He was watching from a distance, giving us His benediction? Was she imagining He was somehow participating, mentally or emotionally? Could she hear Him speaking to her? Was He passing judgment on me as a lover?

"I don't want Him here,' I said. 'He's not invited.'

"Bianca was hurt and dismayed. She had hopes for a threesome.

"Sorry,' I told her. But I wasn't."

Oh no. You were angry. And so was I.

"I could hear Xiphactinus speaking," you tell Petra.

She stares at you.

"What was he saying?" she asks.

“If you’re going to do your worship in bed, you can worship me.”

Someone had to set her straight!

“Bianca couldn’t hear Xiphactinus,” Petra guesses.

“No. But she looked at me as if I’d uttered the words myself.”

Petra puts a slice of prickly pear on her tongue. In the silence she gazes at you, chewing slowly, considering.

When you return to the pocket, she shows you how to use the jackhammer. It has fore and rear grips. You hold it with both hands at hip level and send it sideways into the chalk. The compressor sucks sporadically, filling the tank. Petra clears the chips away with a whisk broom.

By the end of the day, you’ve given the last block of the tylosaur a healthy perimeter. You load the equipment back in the car and return to the Shed.

THE BIG FISH



t's dark. You're on the narrow bed with Petra. Your erection is in her hand, stiff as the bill of a protosphyraena.

"I'm not like Bianca," Petra says.

"Not at all."

"You didn't need her."

"No, I was doing fine on my own. And my independence was about to pay off. One of my consulting clients was a networking startup with nine employees. They hadn't shipped anything yet, and the founder didn't know how to launch a product, so the investors hired me to help.

"A lot had to happen quickly. The product had to be tested. A manufacturing partner had to be found. There wasn't a sales plan or distributors. No thought had been given to tech support. But the more time I spent with the product, the more promising it looked.

"I gave the company a day a week. Then two, then three. When the product was launched, it got great reviews. An ad campaign, along with aggressive seeding, gave us impressive numbers in the first sixty days. The investors were excited. The company seemed poised for success, but there was no

management other than me, and I was part-time.

“They asked me to work five days a week. I wasn’t willing to do that, as I had other clients, but I went to four. I hired thirty people and we ended the year with six million in sales. At that point the investors were convinced I should run the company. They offered me the CEO job with a boatload of options. It meant shutting down the consulting business and parting ways with the team I’d built. But if the company did well, I’d have a prominence I’d never experienced and financial gains I’d never imagined. So I took the job.”

And you grew. Quickly.

“The plan was to ship twenty million in product, hire a hundred and fifty people and post a ten percent profit in the first full year. And we did it. I kept the engineering team lean, focused on innovation. For tech support, ops and administration, I hired liberal arts PhDs. They were smart and motivated but would work for less because they were otherwise unemployable. Marketing was on-target and efficient. For sales, ‘ruthless’ was the theme. I was brutal with our distributors. I forced them to make my numbers for me. ‘It’s the end of the quarter, here he comes.’ We posted the revenue, and the inventory sat in their warehouses until it got sold.”

You had qualms about that.

“I had qualms about that at first,” you admit. “But I met our forecasts—top line and bottom—in the second year, and the third and fourth. The business was screaming, and I was visible to the public now—something that was new and strange. There was a lot of press. My face was everywhere.

“At a restaurant, I’d realize someone was staring at me. A woman beside me in an elevator turned and said, ‘I know who you are.’ I was on a flight from Japan to Hong Kong, and an attendant was seated facing first class. When she picked up a newspaper and opened it, there was a full-page photo of me, bigger than life.”

“That pleased you?” Petra asks.

“It did. And Xiphactinus approved. I’d created myself in his image.”

A big fish, and getting bigger.

“The feeling of power thrilled me. The notoriety I could take or leave. I’d spent most of my life in the shadows, and I was happy enough being out of view.”

Stealthy. Lethal.

“And there was something else, something unexpected. With my new visibility came a reputation.”

“For what,” Petra asks.

“My lack of ‘self-regulation.’ I was trusting my instincts fully now. People knew who I was: easily frustrated, quick to attack, inclined to rage. I was respected for what I’d accomplished, but I was told I was ‘controversial.’ An investor on my board—an older man I respected named Prentiss—thought my hair-trigger temper was a virtue. When I explained an outburst by confessing that I was ‘pathologically impatient,’ he grinned. ‘I love your impatience,’ he said. ‘Don’t ever lose it.’”

So. With his feats prized and his fury adored, my boy had arrived. You were no longer swimming with minnows and jellies.

“With the board’s help, I put together a banking team to take the company public. We beat street forecasts for seven consecutive quarters, and my options were worth a fortune.”

“With the board’s help,” Petra says. “And the help of Xiphactinus.”

She’s stroking you now, coaxing your erection.

“Yes. With the help of Xiphactinus.”

“He’s always with you.” Petra gives you a private smile.

“Talking to you, urging you on.”

“He is,” you reply.

“Even when we’re in bed.”

Oh dear. She’s on to us.

“Even then,” you admit.

“Like Bianca’s Jesus,” Petra says.

“I suppose.”

She tightens on your erection, feeling it throb in her fist.

“I can feel his power,” she says, “when you’re inside me.”

I think, my boy, she’s ready for us.

HE'S HUNGRY



On waking the next morning, you check your phone. There's a crisis brewing.

You ask Petra to delay your departure to the dig so you can make some calls. The first is to Prentiss, responding to his urgent message. Rohrig has obtained a court order allowing him to freeze the undistributed assets of the venture fund out of which your investment in Gnogen was made.

"What's worse," Prentiss says, "he's threatening to freeze *all* of our funds, along with our banking accounts. I've got a meeting with litigation counsel after lunch. What is this asshole trying to prove? What reason does he have to put us out of business?"

"I don't know," you reply. "The attorney you recommended has agreed to defend me. I'm hoping he'll give us a clearer picture."

When Prentiss disconnects, you call the attorney. Your "personal counsel." Who would have imagined it would come to that?

Petra is in the front room, ten feet away. She's heard the interaction. She's looking troubled. You shake your head,

apologizing. Then you open the front door and step through the grass.

The attorney, a man named Schneider, picks up, and after a brief greeting he says, “We’ll deal with the SEC on our own. I don’t know Rohrig, but I have some history with his boss.”

Schneider advises you not to talk to Tanya or anyone on Gnogen’s board. “The company is separating its future from yours,” he says. “My advice is: don’t take this personally. The reaction’s predictable. Rohrig has frightened them. They’re trying to protect themselves.”

“Have you spoken to him?”

“I have,” Schneider says. “You and your partners don’t have to worry that he’s going to shut down your fund tomorrow. But—”

“But what?”

“We have a problem. Our friend Rohrig is trying to define a new kind of malfeasance. He was open with me. He has a theory that venture capitalists are master manipulators. You’re distorting financial markets. He listed a number of behaviors he considers questionable. None are problematic based on current case law. But he believes that, taken together, they constitute illegal behavior.”

“What does he want from me?” you ask.

“He wants a VC to string up as a public example. Someone highly visible.”

Guess who he’s chosen.

You turn and kick the broomweed, muttering expletives under your breath. Your Fancy comes to mind. A simple

solution: the sporting goods store, a weapon, the parking garage—

“The SEC is supposed to serve the common good,” Schneider explains. “Public spectacle is part of the game. And Rohrig is thinking about his own advancement. Taking your scalp would count for a lot.”

“What do we do?”

“We have to persuade him you’re a bad choice for his crusade.”

“How ‘a bad choice?’”

“If you were submissive and obliging, he might look for someone more arrogant to draw his lightning.”

“Obliging? He can go fuck himself.”

Schneider laughs. “That’s one of the reasons he’s fixed on you.

“Timeframes for actions like this,” he warns, “are hard to predict. They can have a long tail, or things can happen quickly. We won’t have much control over that. Rohrig’s asking for further testimony.”

“I’m in Kansas. My mother is dying. I have to be with her.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Schneider says. “Maybe we can do it by video.”

And with that, the attorney wanders into logistics and dates. You’re listening and answering. But most of your being is centered in me, seeing what I can see, feeling what I can feel. Through the greenish haze and the current’s striae, a monstrous creature is turning. He’s close enough to the surface

that the sun is sectoring his hide. His tail—his long tail—is whipping slowly as his giant paddles sweep him around. And now, now he eyes us directly, fixing on us, jaws barely parted, lips unsealing. Through the ocean between, Rohrig's tasting us. He's hungry, my boy, and his mammoth guts are churning.

When the call ends, you face the Shed, open the ill-fitting door and step back inside.

"Ready?" Petra says. And then she sees your state.

"I'm alright," you assure her.

"How bad is it?" she asks.

You trust her, don't you? Well then. You may as well.

With as offhand an air as you can muster, you mention the SEC investigation, explaining the pressure Rohrig's putting on Gnogen, and the actions he's taking to bring you down.

"Have you committed some crime?" she asks.

"He's working on that."

Petra squints at you. Trying to understand. Her bone knowledge hasn't prepared her for this.

"The Interior Sea," you say, "is alive and well in Silicon Valley. They're dangerous waters. I thought I was well-suited to survive in them."

"Was?" she says.

"I'm not sure I'm going back."

A NEW CONCEPTION OF LOVE

When you reach the pocket, the perimeter you and Petra dug around the island of bones is crawling with darkling beetles.

She fires up the generator, the compressor fills, and you continue hammering, separating the island from the surrounding chalk.

The noise prevents speech, so despite your proximity to Petra, you're alone with me, lost in thought, wondering how the conflict with Rohrig will end.

Schneider rings you back before noon with a date and hour for video testimony. In the time between, you'll be riddled by dread. You and Petra return to the car for lunch.

While you're eating, you notice a giant nest at the top of a nearby pillar.

"It belongs to a pair of ferruginous hawks," Petra says. "The female brooded in the spring while I was digging. Lots of bad weather—rain in buckets, broiling sun, pelting hail. When we were loading the skull, the male flew over us, wings wide, croaking and screaming."

She looks up from her food. "Your wife— When did she

enter the picture?”

“After the IPO. I had money and a reputation, but my love life was non-existent. To the world, I was a big fish savaging prey. In private, I was an ape drifting in a lonely bubble.”

Loneliness is a flaw Xiphactinus can't repair.

“I wasn't going to risk my future with another Cristie. Or feed on turtles again, or suffer through someone like Bianca. But I began to mix with women, and out of the interactions, a new conception emerged. I wanted companionship. Affinity, not romance or sex.”

“Affinity?” Petra wrinkles her nose.

“It sounds passionless, and it was. Foolish as well.” You chew and swallow. “I knew I needed a fresh approach. I struck up a few relationships, remaining detached enough to consider my previous errors. I developed a theory, and it went like this:

“Some imagine that love is mutual admiration. You're attracted to her and she's attracted to you. That's wrong.

“Love is more insular than that, and more perverse.

“Love is an exchange, an elliptical one. And the exchange has rules:

“I see, in the eyes of the woman I 'love,' an idealized image of myself. That is: I love her because I love who she thinks I am. And she loves me because she wants to be the woman I imagine she is. The bond of love is a mutual aspiration to inhabit wished-for versions of each other.

“The idealizations are falsehoods. That's the nature of the exchange.

“My love for her is dependent on her fantasy of who I am

and her willingness to hold the illusion dear and put it at the center of her life. That's madness of course—to wish an obsessive delusion on someone else; to cherish it and nurture it; to make it the condition on which intimacy hinges.

“And there's a painful price for failure. The antithesis of love is when one who once loved you has let go of their fiction—when he or she sees you in the cold dawn, as you really are. When the exchange ends, it's rarely reciprocal. If her idealization of me dissolves, if her fantasy about who I am fades, I must destroy my idealization of her posthaste, or the loss will be hard to bear.”

What gibberish! Petra looks amused.

“My conclusion,” you persist, “was that love is a dance of mutual delusion. The best course wasn't to abjure the dance, but to understand it and master it.

“Instead of expecting a woman to imagine I was someone I aspired to be, I gave her the freedom to imagine whatever she liked. What need had I for another's vision of who I was or who I might be? If I wished to revise my identity, I could do that myself. On my side, instead of creating my own idealization of my love object, I sought clues from her disclosures. I remained sober in my assessment of who she was, while I let her draw a portrait of who she most wanted to be. And it was that bundle of illusions that I lavished with careful affection.”

“You put this theory into practice?” Petra asks.

“I did. My new approach led me to my second wife.”

“The wife,” Petra says, “who just walked out on you?”

“That's right.”

AERIAL PREY

After lunch, you use the air chisel. Petra attacks the base of the chalk island with a demolition hammer. Soritec's general counsel sends you a message confirming a time for a call to discuss negotiations with the beasts with long necks and small heads.

Then, in the late afternoon, you get a call from your divorce attorney. Petra continues on her own, while you talk with the lawyer.

"They've come back with a different proposal," she says. "You won't like it."

"I'm getting used to hearing that."

"They're willing to split current assets fifty-fifty if you agree to give Kath participation in future returns."

"What kind of participation?" you ask.

"Fifty percent. They want half of the ownership in any fund you might raise in the future. They're claiming that she's responsible for your success and therefore entitled to that."

"I'm not amused."

"It's an unreasonable claim," the attorney says. "The proposal would never fly in court. But it would take years to get

a judgment. Her attorney knows that. I believe the proposal is Kath's idea."

"What do we do?"

"Say no, and wait for them to moderate their position."

"Our partnership is raising a new fund," you explain.

"I've read about that. If the fund closes while you're married, that will introduce new complications."

"And there's another issue," you say. With that, you give her a flyover of the situation with Rohrig and the SEC. "The assets in one of our funds have been frozen. Kath can fight the government for them, if she likes."

The attorney has a number of questions about the SEC action. You answer them crisply, sharing as little information as you can.

When you're done, she sighs. "An unfortunate turn of events. It's material information, so we'll have to disclose it to your wife."

You thank her and disconnect.

Petra is lugging the compressor to her car. You're done for the day. On the way back to the Shed, she asks about the divorce.

"What's her name? She's being reasonable now?"

"Katherine," you say. "Not especially. She's being vengeful. You understand me. Kath never did. And I never understood her."

Your wife is used to life in the air. For her there are no material barriers, no obstacles or impediments. Things others must struggle for—food, an abode, possessions and comforts— For

Kath, they arrive spontaneously. No forethought or planning is necessary. With a flick of her wings, reality changes, a new landscape appears.

How easy it is for her to glide above everything, feeling the freedom denied to others, winging her way to a distant reef where she settles on a perch, removed from it all. With your new conception of love, you'd encouraged Kath's airy outlook. And she'd woven that dream around herself and your sons.

"How did you meet?" Petra asks.

"At a party of course. For her, that's what life is."

An endless air show. But with all her graces, Kath was no angel. She was a reptile. And while her maneuvers attracted you—her lissome glides on those narrow wings—she was as I've urged you to be: a monstrous creature with an impervious heart.

When others were near, she spoke to you as if you weren't there. And when you were physically distant—across the country or the room—there was no link, no remembrance, no invisible channel. It was as if you didn't exist.

Despite your new conception of love, you saw her as you wished she might be.

I saw her as she really was.

Her wings were leathery and webbed. Her toothless beak looked harmless, but it swallowed fish whole. That's how you snagged her. She was feeding on an enchodus swarm. You followed beneath the surface, seeing her graceful wings and frail body through the glowing green. She was skimming the waves. She dipped her long bill into the brine, piercing the

surface, pinching her prey.

You erupted beneath her, cracking the whip of your tail, launching yourself, sinking your fangs into her velvet breast, crushing the roots of her wings and dragging her down.

The leathery membranes folded around you. You gripped her bones, thin as eggshell, hollow as straw. In her flaring eye, there was recognition; and you saw the smile—strange and disconnected—deforming her painted beak. This was no witless creature. Had you surprised her? Had she meant to be caught?

Fool that you were, you put questions aside. Her independence, her indomitable self, stirred your hunger. Under the water, she was waving her broken wings as if to take flight, to regain her airy element. Your jaws wadded her webs and, deaf to her shrieks, you swallowed her down.

Her freedom was over. She was yours now.

"I thought she was mine," you tell Petra. "I was fooling myself."

"Your new conception of love," Petra says.

"My new conception," you nod. "I showed her an idealized version of myself. And it seemed she'd fallen in love with that. But she saw through my fiction. She knew there was a killer inside me, and it was this she embraced, wanting that fearsome strength in her brood."

Petra looks surprised. "Was she that wily?"

"She was, she was! I deceived myself. I was the one who was swallowed! I was the one who was used."

Can Petra understand your frustration? She can. Through

her scrappiness and her scars, her exactitude and proficiency, the bonehunter has a practical view. At the same time, her life is ruled by divinings. She inhabits a ghostly world, absorbed by the traces of vanished creatures and the ancient Sea.

That night, facedown on the narrow bed, you wake or you dream that you've awoken. Petra isn't beside you. You raise yourself and turn your head, looking around the darkened room. She isn't there. You stand, step toward the lab and open the door. Not there either. Over the sink, moonlight washes the cracked window. Petra's face materializes on the other side of the pane, looking at you. Then she turns and steps away.

Why are you here? Why is she out there naked, crossing the pasture? Is she headed for the dig?

She's a silhouette now, fading into her ghostly world.

PARTNERS

The next morning, a meadowlark follows you from the car to the dig, watching you lug equipment and tools, harrying Petra with his squeaky call. “Eat a cricket,” she yells.

“I don’t like Kath,” Petra says. “You shouldn’t have married her.”

“I was hesitant,” you reply. “My life in tech was all-consuming.”

“I’m listening.”

“After three years as a public company, an internet giant decided they needed us and made an offer. The board approved the merger, the FTC had no objections, and the deal went through. I had a one-year commitment. After that, I was a free agent.

“Prentiss, an investor on my board—”

“The one who liked your impatience,” Petra recalls.

“The venture firm he’d founded was looking for a new partner. There were six, and one was retiring. Prentiss asked if I was interested, and I told him I was.

“The partnership was flat: equal salary, equal carry. The venture community was small back then. If your bets were

good, it was a lucrative business. Our investors were retirement funds and university endowments, and the relationship was hands-off. I hated having anyone over me, so the job suited me perfectly.

“Prentiss wanted to meet Kath, so we had dinner with him and his wife. The next day he gave me a written offer, and I started the following week.”

“Things went well,” Petra guesses.

They couldn’t have gone better. Your eyes, keen for prey, your alertness to blood in the water, your precision and speed— The first investment you made was the largest return in the fund’s history.

“I had some early success,” you say, “but I didn’t like one of our investors. He was opposed to the strategy I wanted to pursue. He’d been a limited partner since the fund’s inception, and I was the new guy. But I forced a showdown. ‘It’s him or me,’ I told them.”

“You attacked,” she says, “without thinking about the consequences.”

You nod. That’s what a predator does.

“What happened?”

“Prentiss was neutral. The other partners sided with me. Prentiss let me replace the investor with someone who was smarter and aligned with my ideas.”

You reach the canopy. Petra sets the compressor down.

“It’s jacketing time,” you guess. Time to separate the fossil island from the pocket of chalk.

But Petra is cautious. “I’m not ready to do the undercut.

There may be some bones in unlikely positions. I don't want to damage anything."

So you spend the day sinking exploratory holes with the rotary drill. You find a lone tail vertebra but nothing else. By sundown Petra's convinced you can remove the island without any risk.

As you return to the car, Petra picks up the thread.

"You're a VC. Things are going well."

You nod. "Our returns mounted. With my partners' approval, I became the public voice for the fund. I hired someone to make media noise, and our reputation grew."

Partners— An odd concept for someone with a hunger for blood.

"What about Kath?' Prentiss asked me. 'When are you going to get married?'

"We'd been living together for a few years. We enjoyed each other's company, and we'd talked about having children. People saw us as partners. With Kath in tow, I would look like part of the tribe. But—"

"But what?" Petra can sense your self-reproach.

"When I thought of marriage," you confess, "I thought of Cristie."

"You were still in love," Petra says.

"I was. I called her. I went to see her.

"She was living in a small apartment. On her buffet, there were magazines and news articles. She'd been following my success."

"Did that please you?"

You shake your head.

No, my boy. You weren't at all pleased. You didn't visit your college sweetheart to prove that her betrayals were a mistake. This was a pilgrimage of remorse! After all my tutelage, all your trials and achievements— You were seeking some kind of requital: an admission of your mutual loss of innocence, a return to the “purity” of your youth! And—of all things—you imagined Cristie would feel the same way and welcome you back.

“Are you enjoying your notoriety?” she asked.

“No,” I replied.

“You had ambitions that didn't include me.” She spoke as if I had turned my back on her. “There aren't many men with an ego like yours.” That's what she said.”

Petra laughs. “Maybe she saw the big fish in you from the start.”

“Maybe she did. It's not who I thought I was when we were young.”

“Who did you think you were?”

“A person of conscience,” you reply.

“Conscience.” Petra sighs.

The plague of apes. It judges you harshly—not just your actions, but your very thoughts. And conscience is never wrong. It makes no mistakes.

Poor Dun. Not a monster prowling the Sea. Not a killer at heart. In his hour of triumph, he yearns to join the confused, the hopelessly lost. Will he never accept his true progenitor—I who abjure shame, I who know nothing of duty or guilt?

I who know only craving and the amoral Sea, dark and endless.

“As we talked,” you tell Petra, “I realized how resigned Cristie was to our failure. Two hours with her was enough. There was no going back.”

A resolution, but a somber one.

“I proposed to Kath the next day.”

You imagined something private. But Kath wanted a public wedding with family and friends and far-flung acquaintances. There was no sex the night of your marriage, but she seemed content.

BEING CANDID



n the morning, when you rise, Petra takes one of your t-shirts and puts it on.

“It has your smell,” she tells you.

When you arrive at the dig, she says that it’s time to jacket the fossil island. Instead of lugging equipment down the trail, you take bags of plaster, wooden boards, rolls of burlap and paper towels.

Beneath the canopy, Petra cuts strips of burlap and piles them beside her. She tells you to ready lengths of paper towel, and once you’ve done that, she pours water over them. Together, you spread the damp towels across the top of the fossil island.

“This keeps the plaster off the bones,” she explains, shaping the towels around protrusions. “Investing isn’t like fossil hunting. You work with a lot of people.”

“That’s right.”

She’s adding more towels.

“Once I’d scored a few wins, I got invited into projects by entrepreneurs and other VCs. I was honest about where I could add value and where I couldn’t. If a CEO had to be

hired, I usually took the responsibility.”

“You always invest with others?”

“Not always. I’ve started a number of projects alone. Do you want me to help?”

She shakes her head. She’s using a whisk broom to press the towels into crevices.

“We keep the rock exposed at the edges,” she says, “so the plaster will grab.” She’s adding more paper towels, doubling and tripling the layers. “What makes a good investment?”

“Sharp, aggressive people, crazy to win. Independent, willing to break the rules. A concept that’s original and addresses a giant market. Not an imitation, not trying to steal glory from someone else.”

Petra has pulled on black rubber gloves. She pours water into a large white bucket, opens a sack of plaster and begins mixing the powder in.

“There’s talent in Silicon Valley,” you say. “But there are idiots too—a lot of them—looking for a trend or someone smarter to follow.”

“You’re hard to work with.”

“I get disenchanted quickly,” you say. “I don’t like proping up a struggling team. I’m angry if things aren’t going well.”

Her hands churn and the mixture turns creamy.

You’re being candid, assuming Petra will be accepting. But there’s still so much she doesn’t know. There are so many things you haven’t disclosed. She’s grabbing burlap strips, dipping them in the plaster, and laying them over the island’s top.

"I'm listening," she says.

She's covering the unconformities with creamy strips, making a hatchwork over the exposed bones and the rock at the island's edges.

"The more money I made, the less tolerant I was. And the less diplomatic. If something bothered me, I let people know."

Petra continues to dip the burlap strips into the bucket and lay them in every direction, using her gloved fingers to press them between and around the protrusions.

"I'd spent most of my life as an outsider, and my alienation was asserting itself. I was being more honest, but the honesty was hard on everyone including myself. You're meticulous."

Petra smiles. "I entertain myself by imagining how the monster will look once he's reconstructed. The jacket for a piece like this has to be strong."

She's smoothing the plaster over the island's top with both hands now. Her movements have a sensual quality. "It gets warm when it sets," she says. "Hand me one of the boards." And when you do, she sets it atop the island and covers it with more plaster and burlap. "For strength," Petra says. "Hand me another. Your funding sources were pleased?"

"Very pleased." You pass a second beam to her. "A university president drove me around his campus to show me the buildings our returns had paid for. 'You're an agent of good,' he said."

"How nice."

"Our entrepreneurs create products and services humanity values. Companies we've started have provided jobs for

thousands of people.”

“But that isn’t what motivates you,” she guesses.

“No. It’s all just blood in the water.”

Petra rises from the pit, removes her gloves and smiles. The chalk is splattered with plaster, and her clothes are crusted with it. “Later, we’ll screw more boards onto the first to prevent flexing,” she says. “For now, we’ll just wait till the plaster gets hard.”

HATCHLINGS

Petra draws a sandwich from her pack, unwraps it and hands half to you. The sky is clear, the day is warm and the jacket plaster's still hardening.

"I'm helping you, aren't I," Petra says.

She's referring to your disclosures.

"Yes," you reply. The scenes from your life are like bones spread out before you. There are enough of them now that the creature's lineaments are clearly in view.

"Tell me about your boys," Petra says.

"The younger one's brainy. The five-year-old's a hellion."

"Have you seen them since your wife left?"

"No. They're with her."

"Do you want to see them?"

"Badly," you answer. "She says they're refusing."

"You believe that?"

"I'm not sure what to believe."

"She may be trying to hurt you."

You nod. "I miss them. And I hope they miss me. But—"

"But what?"

"They belong to her."

Petra sighs. It's the mammal way.

Xiphactinus barely knows his mates. As for my offspring—I may have eaten a few. How would I know?

"She brought them into the world," you say.

While you prowled the Sea, Kath wandered above, flying in one direction and another. Was she confused? Looking for something? Finally the scouting ended. She settled on a cliff top and began to forage with beak and claws. Building a nest.

From her descriptions, the eggs were leathery. She guarded them jealously, warming them with her body and folded wings, never absent for long. She was eager but tense. When would the hatchlings emerge?

Finally they did.

They had wings, you were told, but they couldn't use them. They remained in the nest and were fed by their mother. Then one day, they appeared with her, unable to fend for themselves.

They weren't fish, she explained. She expected you to protect them. Instead of testing themselves in the world, they would test themselves against you.

"You took them under your wing," Petra says with an inquisitive look.

"I don't have wings. But I lavished them with affection. I vowed I'd never abandon them. I didn't want to repeat my father's crime."

"And now?" Petra asks.

You shake your head, reluctant to answer.

"Tell me," she says.

"Maybe it's meant to be this way."

There's liberation in facing the truth: the love of a baby ape is bestowed for selfish reasons and retracted as soon as the need for protection is gone. And the vows— The promises you'd made to Kath, your partner, your wife— Your assumptions about her were mistaken. That's obvious now. She was bound to her need to brood, not to you.

"Maybe fatherhood," you say, "is a kind of cleansing for me."

"Cleansing?"

"To help me shed my illusions."

"We'll return to this," Petra says.

She stands and motions you back to the dig.

The plaster is sweaty now, hard and warm. The two of you reinforce the jacket with additional boards. Then you use the air chisel and jackhammer to trench around it.

"Tomorrow," Petra says, "we'll do the undercut."

"I've got a video call first thing," you say.

Does she see the shudder of dread travel from your neck to your feet?

You're not going to dwell on that.

But late in the night, you reach for her and murmur, "Where are you?"

And she answers, "I'm here. I'm with you," as if she's fully awake and knows perfectly well the threat you're feeling.

WHAT ROHRIG WANTS

t's first thing in the morning West Coast time. With Petra's help you've found bandwidth for your video call in a hotel conference room and settled yourself in a chair. An SEC clerk greets you, confirms the connection, and a moment later your attorney, Schneider, is on the screen. A minute after that, Rohrig appears.

Ebony hair greased, suited in black. Chin crawling with blotches, large nose thrusting.

"Sorry about your mother," he says.

His face turns down, and you imagine an ugly grin. He's opened his red folder. Consulting his notes, cueing his questions. And then he begins.

"At the time of the Gnogen IPO, the registration documents you signed showed that your fund owned twenty-two percent of the company's outstanding shares. Correct?"

"I believe that's correct."

"And the entirety of that ownership was distributed to general partners and the fund's limited partners six months after the offering, immediately following the lockup stipulated in the offering documents?"

“That’s correct.”

“As part of that distribution, you received two million, three hundred and thirty-eight thousand and sixteen shares. Correct?”

“I’m not recalling the number.”

“Was it over two million shares?”

“I believe it was,” you reply.

“According to the banking records in our possession, you sold every share you received the following morning. Is that correct?”

“That’s been my practice,” you say.

Rohrig’s eyes flash. “You don’t waste any time.”

Schneider objects to the implication.

Rohrig ignores the objection and his questions continue in a similar vein, exploring your role in reviewing financial forecasts and quarterly reports, and your oversight as a member of the audit committee.

The tylosaur is drawing closer. Calm, assessing his prey. What might you do to defend yourself? Will you panic when he parts his lips and shows you his teeth? Or will you show some resistance?

Your attorney has interrupted the interrogation. He’s asking Rohrig a question. “Can you help us understand what your objective is?”

Rohrig looks like he’s going to assault him. Then the SEC tyro seems to reconsider. “I’d like to see Dun disgorge the proceeds from his sale of Gnogen stock.”

“Why would he do that?” Schneider asks.

“To show some remorse,” Rohrig flares. “Dun and his cronies are manipulating publicly traded companies, and it’s going to stop.”

“Manipulating?” Schneider says. “How—”

“We’ve frozen the assets of one of his funds,” Rohrig retorts. “Next, we’ll confiscate its assets—cash and securities. After that, we’ll seize *all* the funds under management by Dun’s partnership and issue restraining orders to prevent them from ever raising money again. *From anyone.*”

“You can’t be serious,” Schneider says.

“Try me,” Rohrig dares him.

Rage! And the Fancy comes roaring back. I’m imagining his corpse in the morgue. Cosmetics won’t repair the mess of his chest. And his face— It was ugly before, but now—

“You’re well aware,” Schneider tells Rohrig, “that there’s a new fund underway. If you derail it, I can promise a suit claiming tortious interference.”

The two lawyers fall to threats and badgering. Minutes pass, then Rohrig declares the conference over. The parties disconnect, and you call Schneider back on the phone.

“Can he put us out of business?” you ask.

“He can try. He seems willing to gamble his credibility to bring you down.”

“His demand for disgorgement— What’s that about?”

“It’s a trap. He doesn’t care about the money. He wants you to do something that will look like an admission of guilt. That would help him crucify you.”

“Were you serious about taking him to court?”

“Going after the SEC— No matter how lily-white you are, even if you’ve been perfectly diligent and responsible— It would be dangerous.”

“You think we’ll hear more about disgorgement?”

“We’ll see,” Schneider says.

“So you know, I’m in the middle of a divorce. My soon-to-be ex would like to take everything. There might not be much to disgorge.”

When the call is done, you ring Petra and she picks you up.

“You’re upset,” she says.

“My tylosaur’s circling,” you explain.

“We’ll mount him and put him in a museum.”

You return to the dig, and the undercut begins.

Petra uses a rotary drill, driving holes through the chalk beneath the jacket. You’re chiseling away at the pedestal. She halts to add plaster to the island’s underside, then the drilling and chiseling resume.

When she’s done drilling, Petra retrieves a hacksaw. The two of you wet down the battered chalk and Petra begins to saw, connecting the drill holes. “Watch for cracks,” she tells you. And a few minutes later, separations shoot through the rock and the jacketed mass comes free.

“Careful.” Petra drops the saw and holds up her hand.

Together you inch the cast to the side. Then, “Hup!” you lift it and turn it over.

You’re holding the cradle between you, and Petra is beaming. No bones are visible on the sheared surface. “We’ve got it all,” she says.

Then a vicious wind strikes, rocking you both.
Rain clatters across the canopy. Thunder booms from the sky.

“Put it down,” Petra shouts. “Gently!”

The storm is upon you, the blasting wind sweeps you aside. Petra cries out and you follow her, stumbling through thrashing grass. The Suburban is rocking on its axles.

Petra reaches the driver door and opens it. “Get inside,” she yells.

The wind is howling, peppering the car’s flank with grit and sand. Shield your eyes. Open the passenger door and slip inside.

A COMMITTED ENTREPRENEUR

The wind is clubbing the car. Through the glass: clouds of grit and curtains of rain.

“The chalk is jealous,” Petra laughs. Her hair is wet and her eyes are blazing. “When it comes to separation, we’re good.”

She’s talking about her fossil.

“Maybe there’s another one in the making,” she says. “A final one. For you.”

Petra doesn’t know everything, but she knows enough. Rohrig, Kath, the beasts with long necks and small heads—Prentiss, the fund, attorneys of every stripe—

“How does your story end?” Petra asks.

Her silver-blue eyes are flashing. She’s exhilarated—by the weather, by the recovery of the last of the tylosaur bones. And by the prospect of seeing your future.

“My separations,” you say, “are irreversible. I’m sure of that now. A change is coming. And the guidance I’m getting—” You touch your temple.

“From the big fish,” Petra says.

“Yes. It’s as if the life I’m living will soon be over. As if the Interior Sea is about to return and swallow the world; and me

along with it.”

“That sounds dire,” she says.

You nod and draw a breath. “About a year ago—before Kath left, before Rohrig appeared—something happened that frightened me. I thought, at first, it was an accident. But I see it now as a sign.”

Her eyes have narrowed. A sign of what? she’s wondering.

“Chu was a hardware engineer,” you say. “He was determined to get my attention.”

Just another minnow. He swam into your office and left his business plan with Diana. He needed a first-round investor, he told her, and he’d chosen you.

“When I reviewed his plan, I thought it had potential. I gave him an hour, and he brought his co-founders. They were Taiwanese immigrants. All three were very bright and very determined. Their concept was ambitious, and they’d thought through a lot of the challenges. I had a positive reaction, and I encouraged them.

“Chu scheduled another meeting with me to go through his plan in more detail. During the session, he revealed his admiration for me. He was familiar with investments I’d made. He’d read personal accounts of me and was curious about my history. My responses to his questions were brief.

“I was accustomed to seeing inflated projections, but Chu’s seemed credible. I shared my positive reactions with him.

“‘How committed are you?’ I asked.

“‘My commitment is total,’ he said.

“‘High aspirations require that.’

“‘I understand,’ he said.

“‘Do you?’

“He looked me in the eye. ‘I’m giving this everything I have. Everything.’

“I wanted detailed numbers for the early years, before the first release. I was concerned about funding during the company’s market entry. And it was time to talk to him about the CEO job. As smart and aggressive as he was, building a company as large as the one he envisioned would require an aggressive leader. If things went well, the demands on the chief would come quickly.

“Chu was eager to hear my concerns, so I scheduled an evening session in our office. His revised financials made sense, as far as they went, but I asked him for more detail. When I returned to my concerns about his fitness as CEO, he wasn’t happy. He didn’t want to give up the commanding role.

“It was 2 a.m. I was ready to go home. Chu begged me to stay. He badly wanted me as lead investor, and he saw that his response to the CEO question had dampened my interest. He swallowed his pride and asked me for an honest evaluation of himself.

“And I gave it to him—the good and the bad, his strengths and his weaknesses. The company, if it was going to succeed, needed a monster in charge; and that wasn’t him. The minnow saw himself in the mirror for the first time.

“He nodded, digesting my words. A string of bubbles rose from his lips. Then his eyes rolled up, his chair tipped backward, and he sprawled on the carpet.”

Your eyes are on Petra, watching for her reaction.

She's apprehensive, unsure.

"I knelt and called his name. He was motionless. I felt for his pulse, then I reached for my phone. Stanford's emergency room is ten minutes away. I was calling 911, wondering if an ambulance would get there in time.

"Then he drew a breath.

"He opened his eyes and looked around.

"Don't move,' I said.

"He waved my concern away, rising slowly, shaking his head. I could see how deep his humiliation was.

"Are you sure you're alright?' I asked.

"I'm sorry,' he said.

"Do you have a health problem—'

"No, no, no,' he said, righting the chair. 'I need some sleep.'

"He sat, reached for his business plan and found the forecasts.

"We're done for tonight,' I said. 'You need to go home.'

"Please, forgive me,' he said.

"At our partners' meeting the following Monday, I related what had happened. 'I thought I'd killed my first entrepreneur,' I said. The remark was greeted with fine amusement.

"Later that day, Chu called. He'd been thinking about the CEO question, and he wanted to talk. We met for dinner at a nearby restaurant. After ordering, he took a breath, waved his small fins and lifted his chin.

"If you think it's best,' he said, 'we'll find someone else to

run the company.' He spoke in a pleading voice. 'I'd like to be involved in the selection.'

"I was about to reassure him, but before I could speak, his mouth gaped as if he'd been gripped by jaws. His eyes bugged and his tongue emerged. Again his chair tipped over, and again he lay sprawled on the floor.

"This time there was an audience. Diners were standing, voicing alarm, circling around us. I lifted Chu's head, speaking his name, expecting his eyes to move. But he didn't respond. A man with thick glasses grabbed my shoulder and knelt beside me, feeling Chu's neck. Then he tore his shirt open.

"Crossing Chu's chest was a terrible scar with puncture marks on either side. I imagined some fierce creature had caught him and shook him.

"He's exhausted,' I said.

"The man with thick glasses was tapping his phone with his finger. 'His heart isn't beating,' he said.

"A few minutes later, a van arrived, siren screaming. Medics burst through the restaurant doors. They strapped Chu onto a gurney and drove away."

"What happened to him?" Petra asks.

"The next morning," you say, "the two partners called and told me about Chu's heart condition. The day after that, they called again to say he was dead."

Petra exhales. The wind is rocking the car. Rain's striping the windows.

"I went to his funeral. No one had invited me, and I left before the ceremony began. But while I was standing there

with the lawn rolling around me, I imagined—" You look through the glass at the storm.

"I imagined the cemetery was the Sea. 'This is my element now,' I thought. Chu was weak, and the doubts I voiced finished him."

Petra is staring at you.

"Now," you say, "a more powerful creature is going to finish me."

Does Petra understand?

Yes, my boy. I think she does.

INSIDE YOU

Will the storm's violence end or has it become continuous? The windows are flooded, the car's still rocking. Clumps of tumbleweed scrape the windshield. Are there snakes hidden inside them?

"Chu's death," you explain, "was a new extremity in my separation, a further step in the detachment that had been long underway. I took his death as a condemnation of my character, a harsh judgment by the human family.

"What could I do to defend myself? Instead of fighting my feelings of estrangement, I embraced them. I terminated relationships. I was looking for hostile cues, and it didn't take much to trigger me: a phrase, a glance, a veiled remark. Neighbors, acquaintances, business contacts. Someone I'd recently met, someone I'd known for years—

"My present crisis— In one respect, it's just more of the same. Discovering I have a wife with an empty heart and children who barely know me— Being attacked by class-action attorneys and the SEC— Rohrig is the voice of mankind disinviting me, banishing me from the tribe."

Petra is studying you.

Have you done it now? Have you cut yourself off from Petra?

Quiet invades the fossil wagon. The storm is subsiding.

Without a word, she motions to you. Together you emerge from the car.

The chalk is wet, unpeopled, barren. A pale, ghostly world.

She turns, and you follow her back to the dig, lift the jacketed fossil and carry it to the car. She opens the rear hatch and together you load the cradle in.

That night, as you lie on the narrow mattress, Petra undresses. You notice the items on the bedstand, and as you raise them Petra identifies each in turn. A pteranodon claw. A clidastes tooth. The tibia of a hesperornis.

She removes your t-shirt. She's had it on all day.

"You like wearing that?"

Petra nods. "It makes me feel like I'm inside you."

Then she lowers herself and presses her naked body against yours.

"For you and me," Petra says, "there will be no separation."

6



THE MONSTER'S NECK

The next morning you wake to good news. There's a message from Soritec's general counsel: settlement discussions have begun. Petra is still asleep, so you put on your clothes, exit the Shed and make the call.

"Their opening ask is a gulp," the attorney says. "The stock price is a third of what it was. The amount of the loss is huge."

"Don't be intimidated," you say. "They're ambulance chasers. They aren't feeling the loss themselves. Who's driving things on their side?"

"The firm assigned by the court is leading the charge, but they're all involved."

You picture the elasmosaurs in a ring with their necks extended, jaws open.

"Is the insurer engaged?" you ask.

"They've got their heels dug in. They want us to fight, not settle."

"You need to *demand* that they tip in something. *Demand*."

"I hear you," the attorney says.

"Does the board have a number it's comfortable with?"

"I'm working on that. Everyone's asking what kind of

contribution your fund will make.”

“They can stop asking,” you growl.

“From the plaintiff’s perspective, you’re the deep pocket.”

“The answer is: nothing, nada, zip. Conference me in and I’ll tell them myself.” And then, “This is progress. Keep the discussions going. We can work this out.”

When you disconnect, you see another message—this one from your divorce attorney.

You ring her office, and her assistant puts you through.

“I rejected their proposal,” she says. “We’re not giving Kath half of your future income. So now they’re making new threats.”

“Like what?”

“They’re threatening to disrupt your business. Kath’s attorney says he’ll subpoena your partners—depose them all, along with requesting a truckload of documents and financials. He went so far as to suggest that if we weren’t more cooperative, he’d go after your investors. In advance of that, he’s asking for copies of the subscription agreements, so he knows who they are.”

“We don’t have to oblige him, do we?”

“It’ll be a discovery fight,” she says. “He’ll make his requests, then we’ll tell him the information is private. They’ll say they have a right to it because the funds are community property. We’ll say, ‘You don’t need the information,’ and they’ll say, ‘We have to have it because we believe there are assets you haven’t disclosed, and how else will we know.’”

“I’m going to get partnership counsel involved,” you say.

“Of course,” she replies. “By the way, at the end of all that, I shared the news about the SEC investigation. The idea that the feds might seize your assets shook them. We’ve had a couple of calls since to discuss the matter. I think they’re trying to decide what to do.”

I hold my wrath. But when the conversation is over and the woman is gone—

This nonsense with lawyers, my boy, is a feeble game—for the impotent and sickly, the flabby and lame. This is not how you destroy an adversary.

A moment of concord and the Fancy returns.

Back in the Shed, Petra is up. She’s buoyant, smiling, joyful the last fossil jacket is in the lab room. She’s eager to pick it apart. She wants to start right away.

A shared muffin, then you help her move an older cradle from the central table, and you set the new section there, under the lights. The monster’s neck.

She puts on safety glasses and hands you a pair. Petra positions the tubular air filters over the jacketed mass, training their trumpet mouths; she throws the switch and they roar to life. She connects the compressor hoses and selects an air scribe. Then she hands you a whisk broom to clear away fragments, and she begins chipping away the chalk.

The scribe’s metal tip makes an insistent buzzing that mounts and sinks as the tip digs in. Petra starts near the cradle’s center and follows the curve of an exposed rib. As the flakes come loose, you sweep them aside. The pale rock shatters easily—too easily, it seems, as Petra pauses to switch to

another scribe with a softer buzz and a smaller point.

There's a separation here too, and you're seeing it clearly: the separation between chalk and bone. The scribe reveals it. With a little vibration, the chalk flakes off. It's as if there's life in the bone, and the cream-colored rock is afraid to cling.

Petra is following a break, seeing more bone. Another rib? Part of the throat? Are you under the monster's chest, or are you inside it now?

"Look," she says. "Do you see?" Petra points.

Dark circlets are visible in the hollow she's dug.

"What are they?"

"Pieces of spine," she says. "The edge of a cervical bone. It's cracked, and so is this here. We'll glue as we go. Dick will put them in a blasting box for cleanup before they get reassembled."

With that, she turns back to the hollow and expands it carefully, using the air scribe, pausing every half-minute so you can sweep the chips away.

By evening the hollow is two feet wide and three inches deep. Two ribs are exposed, along with eight inches of spine. Petra turns the equipment off. She removes her mask and gloves, and you do the same.

You follow her into the front room.

Without a word, she kicks off her shoes and pulls the t-shirt over her head.

"So," she says, "you're ending relationships. Leaving the tribe."

You touch her torn nipple. "You're as separated as I am."

“Am I?” Her eyes glitter.

You put your lips to Petra’s. Then you remove her pants for her. When you’re naked yourself, you sit beside her on the narrow bed and put your hand on her thigh.

“Like Adam and Eve,” you murmur.

Starting life over in a godless world! You amuse me, son.

“I was alone,” you say, resuming your story. “More alone than I’d ever been in Kansas. I had money and power. I was at the top of the food chain in Silicon Valley. But I was severing connections at every turn. Kath and I— We were under one roof, but our words were strained and our feelings were distant. She sequestered herself with the boys.

“You still had business acquaintances,” Petra guesses.

“Allies, yes. And rivals, monsters with appetites like my own. And numbers of sycophants and would-be understudies. Success draws plenty of those.

“Admirers, baitfish— People who thought I meant well. They had no idea how coldly I could use my power, and how perverse I’d become.”

“Perverse,” Petra murmurs.

You nod. “Would you like an example?”

THE KISS

"A man named Teague," you say, "wanted my attention."
You stop yourself, sigh and hang your head.
"What is it?" Petra asks.

"You're not going to like this."

"You're making me sad," she says.

"I'm sorry."

"Would you like to lie down?"

You stretch out on the narrow bed. Petra does the same, pressing her naked body to yours.

"Teague was a younger partner in a new fund, short and talkative, and very ambitious. He'd send me proposals, projects he thought were promising. He wanted to sit on a board together, share opinions, see my interactions with management, and score a big return for himself and his firm.

"Teague was smart, and his servility meant that I wouldn't have to worry about getting agreement on difficult issues. So I invited him into the second round of an investment I led. He bought a good piece of the company for his fund.

"Three years later, as my separation from the human family advanced, the investment we'd made was proving successful.

There was a well-publicized IPO, and that brought him notice. The returns made Teague a hero at his firm and added substantially to his net worth. He was happy he'd thrown in his lot with me, and he went out of his way to express his thanks.

"From a local florist he bought twelve bouquets, to be delivered to Kath on the first day of every month. He hosted a celebration at his firm, and I was the guest of honor. He made a point of suggesting that his partners allow me to participate in their fund as a personal investor. And he invited Kath and me to his wedding."

"He sounds like a friend," Petra says.

"Let me finish the story.

"At the wedding, when Teague's bride appeared in her gown, blushing and glowing, I was surprised. She was a beautiful woman. She had raven hair and a swarthy complexion, with brown eyes, full lips and a magnetic charm. An innocent, but open and knowing too. I thought of Cristie, and how things had been so long ago.

"The invitations began. Teague wanted us to have dinner with them at their new home. I refused, but the invitations continued. Finally I accepted, and a date was set.

"Kath brought a bottle of wine, and the newlyweds greeted us at the door. I opened the wine and toasted our mutual success in the kitchen. We talked business—a little—and Teague's wife asked about our kids. She explained in a quiet voice that she and Teague wanted children badly. 'We're trying to get pregnant,' she said.

"It was an intimate disclosure, and when she looked at me

I held her gaze, savoring its depth and sincerity.

“They escorted us into their living room, where the four of us sat and bantered. Then Teague led me up a flight of stairs to a ‘playroom.’ There was a pool table, and the walls were hung with sporting posters. By the door was framed proof that Teague had obtained his MBA from a prestigious school.

“After that, we had dinner. Kath complimented Teague and his bride on every course. After desert, it was time to say goodnight.

“Teague and his wife escorted us to the door. Teague retrieved Kath’s coat and held it while she put her arms in.

“‘Goodnight,’ Teague smiled at her.

“‘Goodnight,’ she replied, and she gave him a hug.

“‘Goodnight,’ Teague’s bride said to me.

“I reached to embrace her. Then, instead of speaking, I put my lips to hers. I pressed her close, feeling her breasts against my chest, moving my leg between her thighs.

“She was frozen, speechless. She gasped, and I touched my tongue to hers.

“Then I drew away. ‘Goodnight,’ I said, bowing politely.”

“What were you thinking?” Petra says.

You shake your head. “I acted on impulse. I was possessed by a terrible longing. And outrage too—at how far I’d come and how little it meant. I felt like I’d earned it.”

“What happened?” Petra asks. “Did Teague respond?”

“He looked at his wife. A forced smile appeared on his face. There was no hint of anger or irritation. His instinct to be deferential prevailed.”

“What about Kath?” Petra asks.

“When I turned, her eyes were closed. I grasped her arm, opened the front door and led her across the threshold. I wondered, ‘Did she miss the kiss?’ I found out later she hadn’t.”

ALIVE AND CIRCLING

The next morning you open your eyes. You aren't rising from sleep on your own. Petra is responsible. She's arousing you, with her hands first and then with her mouth. When you climax, she calls it 'breakfast' and shares it with you.

"You don't need Kath now," she says. "Do you."

"No, I don't need Kath."

"And all the separations you're grieving about—"

"Am I grieving?"

"It seems that way to me," Petra says. "Do they matter?"

She's trying to lead you out of your quandary.

Your mobile is on the bedstand. You reach for it, glance at the screen and see an urgent message from Schneider.

"Do they matter?" Petra presses you.

"No," you say. "They don't." She doesn't understand how critical things are. But she knows you well enough now to read your fear.

You lean closer, kissing the knot on her nose.

"Stop playing with me," she says.

"I'm not playing."

"What is it?" she asks, reaching for your phone.

You let her take it. “A message from an attorney,” you say. “The one who’s dealing with Rohrig and the SEC. Schneider’s his name.”

“Call him,” she says. “I want to listen.”

“Your tylosaur’s dead,” you warn her. “Mine is alive and circling.”

“Call him,” she says again.

So you raise the volume on your phone and ring Schneider. When he answers, you ask him to share the news.

“Rohrig has sent us a Wells Notice,” Schneider says. “He’s making a formal threat to lock up all of your personal assets and the assets of your firm. Everything. It’s a bold move. I wouldn’t have predicted something like this.”

You’re shaking your head at Petra.

“He’s sent Gnogen a Wells Notice of their own,” Schneider continues. “He’s threatening to levy financial penalties on the company for misleading statements in their reports to the street. And he’s asking for a change in governance.”

“What does that mean?”

“He wants you off the board. He says he’s going to bar you from serving as a director or officer of a public company in the future. As I said—”

“You didn’t expect this,” you complete his statement.

“We’ll submit a response, and so will the company,” Schneider says.

“And then?”

“It’s a negotiation. We’ll try to convince the SEC not to bring a case. We’ll see if there’s a solution they will accept.”

Schneider takes a breath. "An hour ago, I got a call from Gnogen's general counsel. They're throwing the towel in. They want you to resign from the board."

Surprised, my boy? Not really.

"They believe," Schneider says, "there's a divergence of interest. They want to separate their fate from yours."

"Rohrig's full of shit," you say. "Our financial reports are perfectly clean. The other members of the audit committee can verify that."

"The other members of the audit committee," Schneider says, "won't testify on your behalf because they're under threat. That's how the game is played. Rohrig knows what he's doing."

At the word "game," Petra is outraged.

When the call ends, she stares at you.

"That would make me crazy," she says. "I'd kill someone."

You laugh. "I've considered that."

The two of you shower and dress. Then you return to the lab where the cradled fossil remains are waiting.

Petra retrieves a sack of finely milled baking soda and loads it into a sand blaster. She turns on the hang-down suction filters. You put on your mask and safety glasses, and she does the same. Then she turns to the cradle of chalk and shoots soda from the blasting gun, picking up where the air scribes left off.

The soda is softer than bone. It clears the chalk away quickly. Pieces of fossil emerge, dark against the pale rock. She adjusts the powder flow rate and the air pressure. A section of rib appears.

While Petra was digging out her monster, Rohrig was stalking you, aiming his conical head, paddles in motion, tail batting the current. He opened his jaws, exposed his curved teeth and unrolled his tongue, tasting you in the water.

The eyes of a fish like *Xiphactinus* never close. He's keyed to danger.

He can outswim a tylosaur in a sprint. The reptile's large, but slow.

And *Xiphactinus* is armed. His ray fins have a killing edge—a curved bone as long and sharp as a pirate's cutlass. A big fish can lay open a tylosaur with a single stroke.

Petra lowers the blasting gun and peers at you through her safety glasses.

"You trust me," she says.

"I do."

She looks at the fossil cradle, its trenched plaster and powdered chalk, and the tangle of fossilized bones. "What are your choices?" she says.

"I can let Schneider do what he can to salvage my assets and reputation."

"Or?"

"I can give up. Become a fossil myself. Bury myself in Kansas and never go back."

"You'd do that?"

"Maybe that's why I'm here," you say. "Maybe I've had enough."

"Enough of what?"

"The ruthless life."

An ape, once again.
“Who are you?” Petra wonders.
She wants to know, and so do I.
“I could fight,” you say.
“What does that mean?”
“Before I left California, I had a Fancy. A crazy fantasy.”
“To do what?”
“To deal with Rohrig,” you say.
That’s my boy.
“Are you going to tell me?” Petra asks.
You regard her uncertainly, wondering.
“Not yet,” you say. “I’d rather not.”

DREAM OF CRISTIE

4ou're in a familiar place, on a city street beside a phone pole. A note is tacked there, with a plea, a phone number and a photo of a tabby with mackerel stripes. It's dusk. The air is dim and the kids are gone.

Someone is approaching. She's a silhouette at first, but as she draws closer, you recognize her and open your arms.

"I heard your entreaty," Cristie says.

You embrace her. "I've missed you terribly."

"What did we know?" she says. "We were so young."

You look for regret in her smile or her eyes, but there is none. You see only her energy and her innocence. "You're so beautiful. Cristie— There's nothing I want more in this world. Do you still love me?"

"I do," she says, frank as a child.

"Things are happening to me," you say. "I want a different life."

"You have only to ask."

Yearning wells inside you, an incurable weakness, the nostalgia of apes.

"Could we take what we learned in the past," you say, "and

start over again? Can we recover the devotion we had for each other?"

"I can," she nods. "What about you?"

What about you, my boy? You can't lie. Not to Cristie.

"I'm not sure," you tell her. "It may be too late for me. I've changed. A presence, an obsession, is in my blood and my brain. I'm compelled—by increase, by taking, by a need I can't put aside. I want to heal. I want to go back. What we felt together— It's the only salvation I can imagine."

Cristie hears you and sees you. That simple smile— She knows what you mean. She understands. And she agrees.

She takes your hand. Without a word, she's leading you. Along the sidewalk together. Beneath a shadowy arch. Up a flight of marble stairs and into a large building. It seems abandoned. No one is visible in the rooms or down the long halls.

There's a white chamber harshly lit from above. She's guiding you into it.

A large table is at its center, and there's a tray beside, loaded with silver tools—scissors and forceps, blades of various widths and lengths.

At Cristie's request, you climb onto the table and stretch out on your back.

You're not a clothed man anymore. You're an enormous fish with an underslung jaw. Your dorsal's beneath you, and your ray fins are hanging down. Cristie has selected a tool from the tray, and it glints as she raises it into the air.

What is she doing, my boy? Ah yes. She's slitting the big fish's belly open, determined to recover the child it's swallowed.

Her expression's determined.

"No one could love this monstrous creature," she says, parting the scaly flesh.

I know, you think. I know, I know.

She sets the blade aside, reaches into the fish's gut and puts her hands on your youthful shoulders.

"Why did you let him do this to you?" she asks.

"I needed his help," you reply. "And the way things are going, I may still need it."

"What kind of talk is that?" she laughs.

"An angel like you wouldn't understand."

Cristie lets go of you. "Shall I sew you back inside him?" Her expression's half-humorous.

You're settling into the moist space. She's studying you, the passing years creasing her cheeks.

"You've changed, Dun." She's serious now. "You've been without your idealism for far too long. Maybe it's gone for good." Her eyes narrow. "You're not a young man. You're older. Much older. The capacity to love— To give and receive. Have you lost that too?"

"Sew up the fish," you tell her. "This is where I belong."

Cristie's features harden. She picks up a needle from the tray.

"I'm sorry," you say, "that I called you back. You can return to whoever you're keeping company with."

She's pulling my lapels together, digging the needle in, tugging the thread.

"You were a bad bet as a mate," Cristie says.

There's a wistfulness in her words. Regret. A hint of grief.
"I'm sorry," you say, "that I couldn't do better."

PRISON TIME

 On waking the next morning, there's a message on your phone from your divorce attorney. You return the call naked, sitting on the bed with Petra beside you.

"Kath and her attorney are worried about the SEC," your lawyer says. "With a federal agency threatening to freeze your assets, they're claiming there's a fiduciary breach."

You roll your eyes for Petra. "What does that mean?"

"Married couples are fiduciaries—you're supposed to demonstrate care and fair dealing. If you take your income, which is community property, and you gamble it away, that's a breach. If you commit an illegal act, like fraud, and it jeopardizes your assets—same thing.

"They're saying the SEC action is evidence of a breach of your fiduciary duty, and any part of the community property that is lost as a result must be offset by you to compensate Kath for the loss. And—" She swallows audibly.

"And?"

"They're going to join your venture capital firm to the divorce."

"Join? What are you talking about?"

“In a normal divorce, there are two parties. But other entities can be joined if they’re critical to the outcome. Kath’s attorney says he’s going to file a motion for joinder to include your venture firm and all of your funds in the divorce. This means that your partnership would pay Kath directly. She’d have oversight on distributions to investors, to insure she’s getting what belongs to her.”

“My partners will never agree to that.”

“Kath and her lawyer,” she says, “are worried your assets will be seized by the government. If you can resolve the SEC business quickly, maybe we can get some concessions from them.”

By the time the call ends, you’ve received another message. This one’s from Soritec’s general counsel. You ring him back, motioning Petra to stay where she is.

“We’re making progress,” he says. “The insurers are finally in play. Pending formal approval, the company will kick in some cash. But the plaintiff wants to see something from you. You’re the only investor on our board. And they know about the new fund.”

Along with small heads, the elasmosaurs have small stomachs.

“I’ll talk to my partners. I expect there’s some modest contribution we can make if the plaintiffs will resolve this quickly.”

When the call ends, you look at Petra. “It’s not all bad news.”

“You’ve got another message,” she says, nodding at your phone.

This one's from Schneider.

You ring him back, and the news isn't just bad. It's unbelievable.

"Pending our Wells submission," Schneider says, "Rohrig's sent us the draft of an order to seize all the assets of your venture firm, along with a restraining order to prevent you and your partners from soliciting funds from investors at any time in the future. And there's an order, as well, that bars you personally from any future involvement in a public company.

"That's the warm-up," Schneider says.

"For what?"

"Rohrig says he's getting a US Attorney involved to try you in federal court. The charge will be fraud. A conviction would mean prison time."

There's alarm in Petra's eyes.

"He's trying to scare you," Schneider says.

"He's doing a good job."

"He may not be serious."

"Well," you swallow your gall. "I guess it's 'wait and see.'"

And you end the call.

Petra's eyes are wide.

"Can he do that?" she whispers.

"No one's going to stop him."

"You've broken the law?" she asks. "You've done something wrong?"

You shake your head. "Being a big fish is enough."

AN AUGUR

Petra has stopped to lubricate the point of her air scribe. You've been working on the tylosaur's throat for hours, seeking some bit of calm, trying to put out of mind the threat looming over you.

The two of you have removed the chalk in layers, revealing the tangle of bone within. Before lunch, you found a shark's tooth—from a squalicorax, Petra said. It had scavenged the monster's corpse, she thought, as it drifted down. There is still no evidence of a mortal wound or clues about what might have caused his death.

Petra has been meticulous. Pieces of cartilage and a neural arch were salvaged from scraps and reattached using a consolidant. With the oiled tool in her hand, she switches the compressor back on and hunches over the cradle, using the vibrating point like a pen: a calligrapher drafting an ancient edict, a nun scribing an illuminated text.

The buzz rises in pitch as the pen digs in and the tiny chips fly.

You can see a row of dark lines, dark vertical lines, emerging from the chalk.

Petra peers at you through her safety glasses. Then she turns the compressor off and sets the air scribe aside. “Ribs,” she says.

She picks up a dental tool, lowers her hand into the trench and scrapes between the lines.

“A smaller creature,” you say.

“A fish. He swallowed it. Almost all of it,” she says. “What we saw in the scan—the elongated thing at the back of his throat—is the fish’s tail.”

“It was in the tylosaur’s throat when he died?”

“Maybe he died trying to swallow it,” Petra says, without looking up.

She’s flaking the chalk with her scaling tool. “It’s nicely preserved. Its ribs. The root of its fin.”

Then she stops. Her dental tool freezes.

Petra tucks her chin, and she straightens herself. Lips pursed, as if she’s damming her words. As if she’s unwilling to share what she’s seen.

“Look at me,” you say.

And she does.

“What is it?” you ask.

There’s omen in her silver-blue eyes. She’s like a diviner in ancient times, reading an augur from the entrails of a slaughtered beast.

“The fin,” she says. “It’s a ray fin.”

She touches the rust-colored thing with her tool. It looks like a piece of machete blade.

“It’s a xiphactinus,” Petra says.

Her labors to retrieve the monster's remains— The dig, the cradles, the skull scans, the exacting dissection—

You're imagining her here in the Shed before the two of you met, late at night, the wind rattling the windows. She's chipping feverishly, conducting a dark investigation of the ancient corpse, searching, searching—

"We're seeing the future," Petra says. "The man who imagines he's Xiphactinus is bound for the monster's gullet."

"I'm going to be Rohrig's dinner," you murmur.

The grisly end is suddenly real. Midnight black, as long as a metro bus, with six-foot jaws and double-rowed teeth that grip your middle. He will shake you till you're faint, maneuver you around and ratchet you into his throat headfirst.

Confused, dizzy— The spotlights above glitter like teeth, and the hang-down filters are sucking. You're already in that enormous throat.

Your knees buckle. You're sinking onto the loose chalk on the floor of the lab, and Petra is sinking with you.

She feels your weakness. She's embracing you, holding you close, whispering. What is she saying? The tylosaur's cradled remains are suspended above you.

You're not helpless, my boy. Oh no.

You have wits and a strength of your own. You have a ruthlessness in the blood, a cruel will and a merciless guide.

You're dangerous.

Rohrig has no idea. And neither does Petra. Go on now. Tell her.

"How did the monster die?" you ask, looking in Petra's eyes.

“The tail lodged in his throat.”

“So your discovery might have another meaning.”

Now it’s Petra who’s confused. Be explicit.

“Xiphactinus killed him.” You speak to her softly, gently.

“What are you saying?” But she knows.

And she’s hesitant. Petra’s uncertain. She’s waiting for you
to explain.

The time has come to quell your fears and face your peril.

It’s not a Fancy now. It’s a plan.

I SPILL BLOOD



can stop him,” you say. “Rohrig.”

“What would you do?”

She’s close to you, son. But she can’t read your mind.

Take a breath. That’s right.

“Kill him,” you say.

There. That wasn’t so bad.

Do you see alarm in her eyes? No, it’s uncertainty, disbelief.

“You’re serious,” she says in a questioning tone.

Don’t falter. There’s no going back.

“My Fancy,” you say.

“Murder?” she whispers. “That’s your Fancy?”

She’s shocked, of course. Don’t waver. You’ll get through this.

“I hate him,” you say.

She can see your hatred. It’s real enough.

I’m here inside you, private as always. Now would be a good time to let me out. Give Petra the privilege of hearing my voice.

“I was born to kill,” you say.

She shakes her head. Is this irony?

"I have a great hunger in my belly. I feel a great heat in my groin."

Petra's lips part. Are you playing with her?

"My thoughts are instinctively twisted. I have a vicious imagination."

She's hearing the ring of truth. Let's erase any doubt she might have.

"I'm a big fish," I say. "For every atrocity Dun sets aside, I imagine two more."

She's understanding now.

"My eyes are keen. They're always watching. In a heartbeat, I'm a chaos of fury and devastation. I spill blood, I take lives."

My words frighten her. But she's listening.

"The man hesitates," I say. "But Xiphactinus does not."

She knows who I am.

"Murder,' my dear, is a shackle for apes. I follow the rule of the ancient Sea."

Petra's eyes are cold.

"What is your plan?" she asks.

Voilà. It's up to you now.

"I'm going to destroy him," you say, "before he destroys me."

Yes, yes— Out with it!

"I know where he works," you say. "At the end of the day, when he returns to his car. I'll wait for him there."

Let's see the blood flow!

"How exactly?" Petra asks.

“Firearms can be traced. There are other weapons that are harder to track. Unfortunately—”

“What?” Petra can see your mixed emotions.

“It will be ugly,” you say.

You’re imagining the tearing of flesh, the jetting of blood, the end of breath—

Petra’s shaking her head. “He’s threatening your life—”

She speaks with the boldness of a predator.

“He can pay the price,” she says.

You’ve wondered since you met her: *where do I cross the line?* And now you know: *there’s no line to cross*. Petra is a wild creature. Wilder than you.

“Come back with me,” you say.

And I hear the unfortunate whisper in your head: *I need you. I can’t do this without you.*

“And abandon my tylosaur?”

“You’ve got the bones. And Dick is here. I’ll pay for the reconstruction. Once Rohrig’s a corpse, I’ll build a house for us and hang your tylosaur from the ceiling.”

Petra doesn’t reply.

“I’m going to be Managing Partner of a billion dollar fund.”

“That’s not why I’d come,” she says.

Oh no, not Petra. She’d come for the blood.

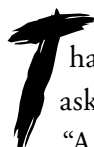
A shivering scream overhead.

“It’s the hawk,” she says.

Her ferruginous hawk, that modern scion of the reptile clan. It’s sailing over the Shed, wings spread wide, expressing

a lust for carnage. A signal, my boy. An invocation— Like the landing of the asteroid that ended the Mesozoic, this is the start of a new world. Or the return of an ancient one.

THE ONE WHO DID WELL

 hat evening, while Petra loads clothing into a duffel, she asks about the weapon.

“A firearm can be tracked,” you say. “And a knife takes skill. I thought of a speargun, but the ones I saw use a thick rubber band and the thrust is weak. Then I looked at crossbows. They’re powerful and deadly. You can bring down a big animal, and they’re easy to use at close range.

“I know what I want and where to get it. Payment in cash, no registration.”

“Where would you do it?” she asks.

“In an underground garage, beneath Rohrig’s office in San Francisco. He has his own parking space, and he works late. He takes the elevator to the ground floor, then uses the stair to walk to his car. I’ve stood in the shadows, watched him get in and drive away.”

That you scouted your prey is a comfort to her. She asks for more detail, and you describe how you will approach him, deliver the deathblow and make your escape.

No doubts, no hesitations. To an unknowing eye, you’re Xiphactinus in your marrow. You breathe water. You have

spikes for teeth. When you feel like killing, that's what you do.

The next morning, the two of you board up the windows, load her tylosaur skull into the fossil wagon and head east. You stop in Lawrence to leave the skull with Dick, along with a key to the Shed.

He's stooped and graying, with a week-old beard. Dick swats the chalk dust off his pants and wonders aloud if Petra is coming back. She reassures him without saying yes or mentioning a date. His last words are, "You'll be alright," and they're spoken to himself.

You return to the Suburban and continue east. Petra is at the wheel.

It takes forty minutes to reach Kansas City. As the metro area appears through the windows, Petra looks at you. "We're not far from Overland Park," she says.

Testing you. Are the feelings still there? Does the killer want to see his favorite aunt? She'll be ninety this year.

"Maybe I should," you say.

After all this time— It's too late, my boy.

But you're not listening to me. The child's fond remembrance is drowning me out. All that warm emotion, and the futile hope that they'd take you in. Oh dear! If they *had*, the whole course of your life might have been different!

You've retrieved your phone and found the address.

"You're still nursing your rejection," Petra says sadly.

"I am," you admit, making the call.

It's vindication you need, my boy. Mixed perhaps with a little revenge.

Aunt Helene answers. She's at home, and she's eager to see you.

A fifteen-minute drive and Petra pulls up in front of a small apartment block. You've not been here before. The two of you exit the car, and you find your way to the second floor.

You knock on the door, and a moment later she's standing there, inviting you in.

Look at you. You can't help yourself. The sight of her kindly face, that vulnerable smile— Petra is seeing it too. As you step into the modest front room, you half expect Uncle Luther to emerge from the hall with a gravelly greeting and a red-faced laugh.

You sit on the sofa, seeing a familiar knick-knack on the mantle, a familiar painting on the wall— Mementos from the home you had hoped to join long ago. Yearning, regard, the sting of rejection— It's hard for me, very hard, to stomach these mawkish emotions.

Helene is speaking of her life without Luther, your mother and her final days, an expected visit from her son, your cousin. The old woman's mind is still sharp, her memories intact.

"You wanted to come live with us," she says, remembering. And she makes a helpless face. Feeling guilty.

"We had already raised two boys," she says.

You shrug, as if it hardly matters. So much time has passed.

"How are they?" you ask. You've had no contact with either.

Aunt Helene says your cousins are fine, but there's a forgiveness in her voice, as if things might be better. One is a

claims adjuster, she says. The other's a substitute teacher. "They know of your achievements," she says.

You nod. The information is easy to come by.

Now Helene faces you and raises her chin with a bemused expression, as if she's considering the role misfortune has played.

"You're the one who did well," she says.

How nice! An angry nephew might have attacked her. A resentful one might have replied, "You and the others left me no choice." But you're more gracious than that. You smile and accept her praise. After all, what right have you to complain? Aunt Helene is as much responsible for your success as the father who abandoned you or the aquarium fish who ate his mates.

Before long, the conversation runs dry. You and Petra bid Aunt Helene goodbye and head for the airport.

A MORE VIOLENT LIFE

The flight is late, and it's dark when the hired car pulls up the drive to the family home. Odd for Petra, and odd for you. The Shed was welcoming, but the lavish dwelling is not. You thank the driver, retrieve your keys and cross the threshold.

The house is quiet and dark. You aren't going into the master or the room of either child. Petra suggests the two of you sleep together on the living room couch. Accustomed now to a bed for one, that's what you do.

The next morning you leave at sunrise and spend the day rummaging through second-hand clothing stores, party shops and cosmetic boutiques. Petra is blithe, in high spirits. She's not at all discomposed by the urban setting, the crowds and stores. It's as if she's discovered a new amusement. She turns in front of a mirror, modeling a vintage swimming cap, lips parted, admiring her image. She shows a command that lifts your spirits.

But when the shopping is done, you take her to Rohrig's building and the parking garage, and the amusement ends. Here too, the bonehunter shows her strength. "Against your fury," she says, "what can he do? He's no match for you. You've

got spirit and guts.” In the dark garage, she embraces you, her eyes burning.

After lunch you plan your visit to the sporting goods store in San Jose. Petra binds her hair up under a hat, distorts her face with makeup, and dresses in cowboy boots and a flannel shirt. You’re unshaven with a vest, sunglasses and a blue bandanna. On the way there, you rehearse the plan.

When you reach the store, you park at a distance and remain in the car. Petra checks herself in the rearview mirror, biting her lip in a parody of dread. Then she’s grinning, laughing at her reflection.

She faces you, and instead of humor, there’s a dark desire welling inside her.

“You know something,” Petra says. “I’m wild about you. I’m lucky we met.”

She takes the cash you’re handing her.

“This is exciting,” she says.

“Triple blades,” you remind her.

Petra nods, leaves the car, crosses the parking lot and enters the store.

An amazing woman. She’s with you in this.

Ten minutes pass. Then Petra exits the store with a paper sack in her hand.

She crosses the lot, opens the car door and lowers herself onto the seat.

“Got ‘em,” she says, smiling, smirking, showing her chipped tooth.

She opens the sack and removes a package with a glassine

front. "Five of these." And she turns the package toward you.

Behind the glassine are three silver arrows with scarlet fletching.

"Nice color," you say.

"I can see them going in." Petra hands you a box of razor heads with triple blades.

You smile and kiss her. "I'll be back."

You exit the car and cross the lot slowly, feigning a limp.

Inside the store, you make your way to a display counter at the rear. A crossbow you know by its specs is with others, beneath the glass. It has a black frame and a fiber bow, a rifle stock and silent crank cocking. The young clerk retrieves an unopened boxed bow from behind the counter, and you pay for the weapon in cash.

"Have a place to shoot?" he asks.

You nod.

"Here's your receipt," the clerk says.

You're wondering what he's seen of you, what he'll remember.

The cautious ape is fussing. Someone will track down the arrows and where they came from. Will they identify the device that propelled them into Rohrig's body? Whatever record they find of the purchases, there won't be much.

You exit the store, still limping, and when you reach the car, you hand the box to Petra and start the engine without a word.

You're on the freeway, headed north, when you speak.

"To think," you say, "my Fancy's turned into this. It's all—"

“Because of me?” Petra says.

Her look is self-effacing but bold.

“Yes,” you reply. “Because of you.”

She hears the earnestness in your voice and she matches it.

“You know who you are now,” she says.

Her voice is tender and adoring.

“I’m eager to try this thing out. The park on Skyline has an archery range. Hay bales won’t stop an arrow moving four hundred feet a second, but there are redwoods and clearings. We won’t look out of place there.”

Petra’s opened a box of razor heads. “He’s not going to like these,” she says.

The blades spring out on impact. An arrow will make a large hole.

“Give me your hand,” she says.

You keep your left on the wheel and remove the right, extending it toward her.

She kisses your palm and puts one of the razor heads in it. The bullet-shaped device is as sleek and cool as Petra.

For firing, the work is done by the bow. You just aim and pull the trigger.

Can you do it, my boy?

Petra believes you can, and so do I.

This is the beginning of a more violent life.

THE PARKING GARAGE



It's the end of the day. Rohrig's working late, as expected. You're in the parking garage, standing by a concrete pillar three spaces from Rohrig's car, crossbow by your side. You're in black pants and a rain parka, hood down. Petra is thirty feet away, watching, posted by the turn in the ramp beside your sedan. At this hour the garage is quiet. Most of the spaces are vacant. Most of those working in the building have left.

Petra's unruffled, cool as bone. Without a word, she used her scarf to wipe your DNA off the arrows. She's done nothing to suggest the slightest fear or compunction. Her sense of purpose is firm.

You watched her an hour before: buttoning the black blouse, putting up her hair, eyeing herself in the rearview mirror. She shifted her jaw to the side, calculating, grounding herself. She's ready.

And you?

Can you do this, my son? Take Rohrig's life straightaway, without hesitation?

Oh yes. You can. You're nervous, but I'm going to help with that.

Repeat after me:

I'm a big fish, and I live in the Interior Sea. There are no herbivores here. All the creatures prey on each other. It's a world without conscience, ruled by the ruthless. None of the departments that govern simian life—working together, raising young, safeguarding the weak, insuring that fairness and justice prevail—have yet emerged. Guilt and shame won't appear for millions of years. None of those hindrances will muffle my rage or impede my resolve—

The sound of steps. Descending the stair.

Petra raises her hand. Is it Rohrig?

You scan the garage on either side. No one's in sight. And the figure descending the stair? His legs come into view. A man.

If it's him, you will have the privacy and obscurity you want.

And the man: is Rohrig. He's reached the bottom of the stair. He's striding toward his car. Are you ready?

Click. He's unlocked the car door.

You tighten the grip of your gloved hands on your weapon. The first arrow is ready. The nock's on the wire, and the bow is cocked.

And now, as Rohrig opens the car door, you shoulder the bow like a rifle and step from hiding.

You know the man's face. It has loomed in person at you. It has leered through a computer screen, speaking threatening words. It lives in your memory as something monstrous. It is odd, therefore, when Rohrig fumbles his briefcase and drops

his coat.

An opportunity to catch him unaware.

You close the distance, crossbow raised; and as he straightens, he lifts his head.

“Just the man I wanted to see,” Rohrig says.

You’ve surprised him, and he’s responded without missing a beat.

“The last you’re going to see,” you say, and you fire at his striped tie.

The silver arrow plunges into his front.

“Enjoy yourself,” you say, drawing closer.

Let him fill his gaze with your face. That’s right. Let him fill his mind with it.

Rohrig swoons. He falls to the asphalt. A hole appears in his chest. The razors of the head have expanded. He’s lying there, crumpled, on his side.

Now, slowly, he turns his face up.

Still conscious, my boy! Still fully aware, as we’d hoped.

I see shock, I see terror. Closer, my boy. Put your face a short foot from his.

Now, dear Rohrig— Are you really a tylosaur?

Where’s your confident nose? Where’s that toothy grin? That’s no roar I’m hearing. It’s a choking gasp. And those seeking eyes— Are they pleased with what they’ve found? Is there rage in them?

Oh no. The rage is mine. Entirely mine.

I was your target. Remember? You had plans for me.

Time to load a second arrow into my bow.

Have a good look, my friend. I'm down on one knee. Shall I move a little closer? Can you see the string winding on the cams? Can you see the bow bending? This requires some strength, you know. Force and intent—

Are you watching? Yes, I believe you are.

The second arrow is in. The nock is gripping the string. The crossbow is cocked.

Do you see, do you see—

I'm raising the stock, I'm putting the butt to my shoulder. I'm placing the razor head two inches from your eye. The triple blades will expand on contact. When I pull the trigger, the arrow will rip a channel through your brain.

How will that be? Let's think about that.

Oh yes. The thoughts are very enjoyable!

Alright. Fire, already. Just fire, my boy.

And you do. The arrow pierces Rohrig's eye, and the bow sides spring back.

You've done it.

He's squirming in a growing pool of blood on the greasy floor, a mindless gurgle in his twisting throat. Rohrig, it seems, has made a mistake. The creature he chose to attack was smaller, yes; but more dangerous than he imagined. He's the dinner, not you.

Schools of gillicus are swarming around him, sucking his blood from the passing current. There's not as much of it as they might like. This is no giant, no reptilian beast. It's an arrogant bureaucrat. Not even that. Not anymore!

The bureaucrat imagined a civilized game. He imagined

you'd play by his rules. The thought of his foolishness, and the sight of his lifeless corpse—

Remorse, guilt, a change of mind?

Not a breath of that. Your spirits are leaping!

You feel only a predator's glory, and you fill the garage with a predator's roar. Neither senseless nor heedless: you want all creation to feel your savagery, to hear your cry and know what you've done.

RUMBLING CURRENTS



hat's enough. Control yourself.

Petra has taken the crossbow.

You're still bent over the quivering body, swirling your hands in the air above the pooling blood, feeling its power, drawing whatever life and spirit remains, wanting it for yourself.

She's grabbed you now. Petra's hurrying you back to the car so you can make your escape.

She finds the keys in your pocket.

She opens the car door and settles you in. She'll drive. You're in a state.

Petra is seated now, starting the engine. You're watching her. Are you listening too? What is that sound?

She's turning to look behind her as she backs the car out.

Do you hear it? Beneath the motor's hum—

Is it the rumble of traffic on the street above? Or the sound of deep currents. Cruel applause, perhaps, for the violence you've finally released.

There's water, Dun. Briny water, flowing not from the garage entrance above, but rising from the floors below. If you

turned and looked behind you, you'd see waves slapping across the surface. The dark flood is submerging the concrete ramps.

Petra's gunning the engine. Does she mean to outrace the climbing tide?

Put your hand on her thigh to calm her.

It's fine. Everything's fine. The Sea has come.

The flood from below has reached the car. Waves thump the doors and slosh in the wheel wells. You lift your hand to the dash. You turn the ignition off.

Does Petra understand?

So long forgotten, so long in abeyance, the rumbling currents are reclaiming the earth. You've summoned them, son.

The rising Sea is lifting your car, moving you toward the garage exit. And the water is pouring in through the dash and the floorboards.

The mouth of the garage is just ahead. As you approach, the car sinks farther beneath the surface. The waterline's reached the windshield now.

Petra's eyes are wide. She's not ready for this.

What should you do?

Relax, my son. Relax and enjoy the return.

The air is not your element. The cavernous earth, city or town, the enclaves of apes— This was never your home. Around you water has filled the space between the garage walls. It's a giant aquarium now. And your car is alone, the only fish in the tank.

You've reached the exit. You're bumping the walls and barreling through.

Beyond, the submerged traffic is frozen. Cars and trucks are motionless, paralyzed drivers locked in disbelief, watching the water flooding around them.

Did you do this? Has Rohrig's death changed the world? Or was it always this way? How long has the human line been strangled beneath the surface?

The Sea lies deeply over the sleeping city.

Petra is in the driver's seat, but the steering wheel has disappeared. She's confused, my boy. Puzzled she has so little command. Waking to the new reality.

The current sweeps you up, and from an increasing height you see: most of the human home is drowned. Your vehicle is a submersible, gliding between office towers and condominiums, over roadways looped and tangled like noodles dumped from a bowl.

How many grasped this? How many understood?

The Interior Sea doesn't belong to prehistory—an era that came and went. The Sea is the world's true state, and it takes nothing more than a glimpse of the view beyond the windshield to see this is so. The tall buildings melt as you watch, like sandcastles in an incoming tide. And just as quickly, new currents catch the particle scarves and roll them together, reshaping them, fashioning a new stage for the slaughter of lives.

We don't have to travel to a distant land to find creatures aplenty on which to feed. Here you are, in the perfect vehicle, seated behind my scarlet gills, your arm on the root of my tongue. The grill of your streamlined sedan is sporting chrome

spikes. You look not through a window of wipered glass, but through exacting adjustable lenses, giant sclerotic eyes.

In the watery world you now rule, we travel together.

HAPPILY ONE

How clear the aquatic life is for those who command it. How bright the present, how murky the past. Distant locations, dramatic events, dire moments, victims and threats— Vague imprints all, faded by the moon's bowing path, diluted and washed away by succeeding currents.

What became of the deadly Dun?

Fortune followed his human shadow. It eluded the SEC which, with Rohrig's demise, lacked a fanatical pilot. It battled out an agreement with Kath and wrestled a truce from the thugs with small heads. It closed the fund that Prentiss passed along, and found pleasure with a new mate.

As for the real Dun—

The separations that troubled him reached their end.

The faithful pupil and his ruthless tutor are now happily one.

Now, in the murky deep, cruising for blood, we hear the storms above—the rain and wind and the endless crashing. And that odd companion, the lost girl— We hear her too. She's inside us now, a ghost from an imagined future—a future that never unfolded, a future in which the Sea and its

myriad creatures were nothing but bony remembrances.

For us, the great waters live.

And they live so that we may command them.

Those we prey on find calm in indifference. The waving crinoids lean this way and that, lulling, soothing; algal particles fall like minuscule beads on invisible threads; and through them throngs of ammonites drift, backward facing, tentacles waving. For the young and the small, life's an oblivion: a splash of bubbles, whimsical froth. Gastropods crawl, crustaceans click, legs stir the sand from beneath, while needle minnows streak through fluttering weeds, and the skirts of jellies rustle and lift.

Then, in a heartbeat, everything stops. Peace dissolves, madness returns. The tiny eyes and feelers all turn in the same direction. A sudden threat, injury or death— A savage creature, brutal, uncaring and so much larger. The big fish rushes in, arching his back, swallowing life. Turtles sink, horny beaks clamped; belemnites dart, worms thrash, squids shiver their fins and flail their arms. The scourge has come! Woe to creation, woe to the Sea!

A doubting scallop objects: this isn't the monster with sapphire teeth, it's a lumbering filter feeder, the laughable bonnerichthys. At that, a babel of voices rise: I can smell the gore on his lips; the stench is burning my siphon, scorching my gills; my antennae are twitching; he's carrying something dead in his jaws; no, not dead, the pitiful thing is still struggling!

We are your nightmare, my treats. We are the one who

makes your flesh creep, the one whose shifting eye freezes you all. Doubt us not! Our spikes will impale you. We'll engulf you whole with our sucking maw! We are the end—without mercy or feeling. We are the question you cannot answer, the fate you will not escape.



Rich Shapero's novels dare readers with giant metaphors, magnificent obsessions and potent ideas. His casts of idealistic lovers, laboring miners, and rebellious artists all rate ideas as paramount, more important than life itself. They traverse wild landscapes and visionary realms, imagining gods who in turn imagine them. Like the seekers themselves, readers grapple with revealing truths about human potential. *Xiphactinus* and his previous titles—*The Hornet's Spell*, *Hibiscus Mask*, *Beneath Caaqi's Wings*, *Dreams of Delphine*, *The Slide That Buried Rightful*, *Dissolve*, *Island Fruit Remedy*, *Balcony of Fog*, *Rin*, *Tongue and Dorner*, *Arms from the Sea*, *The Hope We Seek*, *Too Far*, and *Wild Animus*—are available in hardcover and as ebooks. They also combine music, visual art, animation and video in the TooFar Media app. Shapero spins provocative stories for the eyes, ears, and imagination.