Loch & Key
An InCryptid Story

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by

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“Has anybody seen my tackle box?” Alexander Healy emerged from the attic, clomping down the extendable ladder until he reached the hallway floor. His daughter-in-law peered at him from the nearest doorway, looking puzzled but not alarmed. He frowned at her. “I need my tackle box. I could have sworn it was in storage up in the attic, but it’s not there.”

“If you’d left it in the attic, the mice would’ve dismantled it for ritual purposes years since and you know it,” Fran replied, unperturbed by his frown. Then again, Frances Healy was unperturbed by most things, even when they were actively trying to kill her. One slightly irritated father-in-law was nothing. “You know better than to store anything up there.”

“It’s a big tackle box,” he said defensively.

“Then it needed to be put in a big place where the mice weren’t,” Fran said. “Ask Enid. She’s probably the one who moved it.”

“Fran, have you seen my socks?” Jonathan’s voice drifted mournfully up the stairs, his tone implying that the absence of socks was a tragedy previously unknown in human history.

“Yes,” Fran shouted back. “I saw them when I packed them. Calm down and start making the sandwiches.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“You’re welcome.” Fran turned back to Alexander, rolling her eyes. “How did that boy survive before I came to live here and manage his laundry’s every move?”

“He bought more new pairs of socks than any single person needs,” Alexander said, and pushed the ladder back up into the attic. “I’ll go ask Enid about the tackle box. Do you have everything you need?”

“Close enough for monster hunting,” Fran replied, with a brief but sunny smile. “Go on, then, go if you’re going. I’ll finish getting everything together up here, and I’ll be down in the hallway before Enid starts fussing about beating the sunset.”

“Thank you dear,” said Alexander. He walked over and pressed a kiss to Fran’s temple, causing her to laugh and wave him off, before he turned to head down the stairs. She was right about one thing: if they didn’t finish getting their supplies together soon, Enid would start fussing about the time, and once that happened, they were none of them getting any rest.

Thank God for that.

Preparations for the annual Healy family fishing trip had been consuming the household for the better part of the week. Bearing that in mind, Enid Healy had absolutely no idea why things were still in such disarray. The Coleman cooler was packed with sandwiches and drinks for the drive; the somewhat larger kitchen box was full of spices, dried meat, preserves, and things that didn’t need space in the precious cold. All the hunting, fishing, and tanning gear was already boxed up and in the back of the truck, and yet her son and her husband were both tearing around the house like basilisks with their heads cut off, inventing problems where there didn’t need to be any.
“Darling, have you seen my tackle box?” asked Alexander, coming into the kitchen for the third time in less than an hour.

Enid bit back a sigh, forcing herself not to entertain any thoughts of peaceful widowhood as she replied, “Yes, I have.”

“Wonderful. Where is it?”

“In the back of the truck, along with all the other tackle boxes, the rods, the bait, and everything else. Tell me, when I said ‘I’m moving the fishing gear to the truck,’ what did you think I was talking about? Because I really didn’t think that was a phrase that left much room for misinterpretation.”

Alexander blinked. Then, flushing slightly, he said, “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to make sure that everything about this trip goes as well as possible.”

Enid reached out to touch his cheek with her fingertips, a small smile on her face. “I know, and I love you for it, but we can’t force the kids to enjoy spending time with their elders. If that were something that could actually be forced, it would have been written into law long ago.”

“I know, I know. It’s just…” Alexander glanced over his shoulder to the kitchen door, checking to be sure that neither Jonathan nor Fran was standing there, a silent, observant third party in what was intended as a private conversation. Turning back to his wife, he finished, “It’s been so long since either of them has been this happy. I don’t want to do anything that could endanger it.”

“I know.”

It had been a little over two years since the youngest member of the family, Daniel Healy, was killed in his crib by a bogeyman assassin hired by some unknown individual. They’d been searching for the one who paid for Daniel’s death ever since, only to come up empty-handed every time they thought they might have found a lead. Alexander had spent countless hours in the library, combing through the records for an idea of who they might have offended. Enid had spent almost as many hours sitting in The Haven, Buckley’s one cryptid-friendly drinking house, buying beers for Bigfoots and waiting for someone to let something slip.

No one had. After two years, the trail was as cold as it had ever been. The wards on the doors were better, more precisely designed to stop potential enemies from getting inside. The mice had started keeping watch by the doors, little groups of five and six trading off throughout the night to make sure that the humans they were so devoted to were not in any danger. The house was as safe as it had ever been, and time was finally beginning to do its duty: time was finally beginning to heal all wounds.

“Fran’s been smiling more lately,” said Enid, touching Alexander’s cheek again. “I think she’s ready for this. I know Johnny is. Have you seen the way he’s been stepping around the house these past few days, like the last two years never happened?”

“But they did,” Alexander said.

Enid sighed. “Yes, and we can’t undo them, more’s the pity. But Daniel wouldn’t want us to be sad forever. We’ve mourned him near as long as we had him with us. It’s time for everyone to move on, his parents included.”

“But are they ready to see it that way? That’s my concern.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Enid, with a small shrug that did nothing to alleviate his worry, although it did provide a momentary distraction as he watched her shoulders moving under the thin fabric of
her house shirt. Near forty years of marriage, and sometimes her smallest gestures could still take his breath away. Enid smiled impishly, catching the angle of his eyes. “Now come and help me load the truck.”

It took three hours of driving down increasingly narrow and unmaintained roads before they reached White Otter Lake. There were other lakes closer to Buckley Township, including the Black Lake—one of hundreds with that name, sure, but it was the only one that actually touched on their hometown. Some of those other lakes had their own reputations as excellent fishing spots or for beautiful scenery, but… “Good reputations draw people, and people are what we’re trying to avoid,” had been Alexander’s last word on the subject. So it was four people crammed into a three-seat truck already laden with camping gear and fishing equipment, rattling down gravel paths that barely merited the title of “road.”

Enid drove, with Alexander sitting shotgun, while Jonathan and Fran struggled to maintain their balance in the cluttered truck bed. Well, Jonathan struggled, shifting constantly from spot to spot as things slid and endangered his knees. Fran spent the entire ride perched cross-legged and easy atop Alexander’s tackle box. When it slid, she slid with it, seemingly unperturbed by her change in orientation.

The first time Jonathan watched his wife glide past him like a sailboat in a high wind, he was annoyed. By the third time it happened, he was laughing, and Fran was laughing with him, and that joyful sound—along with the growl of the engine—heralded their arrival at their final destination.

“We’re here, kids,” called Enid through the window as she parked the truck in the shelter of a stand of tall white pines. She killed the engine and slid out of the cab, planting her hands in the small of her back and stretching mightily. “Hoo, that drive gets longer every year. Think someone’s been moving the lake?”

“It seems unlikely,” said Alexander, emerging from the cab on the opposite side of the truck and promptly moving to lower the gate at the back of the bed. “Come on, you two. Let’s get unpacked before the sun goes down and the bears come out.”

“There’s bears here?” asked Fran, grabbing a sleeping bag in each hand as she climbed to her feet.

“If nothing has eaten them, yes,” said Alexander. “And may I take this opportunity to apologize again for never having brought you here? White Otter Lake is a Healy family tradition. You’ve been with us for nine years. How have we never managed to take you fishing?”

“Bad timing, that unseasonal jackalope migration, and other factors,” said Jonathan, picking up the cooler as he followed his wife out of the truck. “It’s all right, Father. We’re here now. The past doesn’t matter.”

Alexander sighed to himself, watching the younger, stronger members of his small family move around the truck to ask Enid where they should start setting up. *The past matters, son,* he thought, knowing he’d never be able to convince Jonathan of that; not while it was early enough to make a difference. *The past matters more than you can ever know.*

Enid directed the establishment of their small camp in the shelter of yet more pines, these ones tall and strong and opening on the stretch of hard-packed mud that served the lake as a beachfront. The four of them made a surprisingly compact footprint: two tents, the bucket that they were intended to use for washing up—both dishes and bodies—and the portable grill and cooler, set off a bit to reduce the chances of anyone
accidentally setting themselves on fire during the night.

“We’ll keep any fish we catch but don’t intend to eat straight away in the larger cooler back at the truck,” said Alexander, making the final adjustments to the hammock where he had stated his intent to spend most of the days. “That way, if any bears do decide to show up, they’ll have something more interesting than us to cut their teeth on.”

“Y’all keep taunting me with bears, but I don’t see anyone actually producing any,” complained Fran. She had already taken advantage of their isolation from Buckley’s “civilized world,” stripping down to cutoff shorts and a thin white T-shirt she had probably stolen from Jonathan. “If you’re going to keep promising me bears, you’d better be prepared to actually give me bears.”

“I promise you, the lake has better than bears to offer,” said Enid. She made a shooing gesture. “Go on, you two, and make sure that we’re alone before we get too comfortable. I’d hate to get everything unpacked and then learn that we’re going to need to move if we want to see any of the local wildlife.”

“Yes, Mother,” said Jonathan. He paused to kiss her on her temple before following Fran, who was already running for the lake. Enid laughed as she watched them go.

Alexander stepped up behind her, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Has anyone actually warned her about what’s in the lake?” he asked.

“Not in so many words, no,” said Enid. “It seemed like the sort of thing that would go over better as a surprise.”

“Go over better’ in the sense that she’d have an easier time of things, or ‘go over better’ in the sense that you’d get to hear her screaming her head off?”

From the direction of the lake, Fran screamed. It was a long, loud bellow of a sound, with nothing shrill or terrified about it. Toward the end, it even sounded like she might be screaming in delight.

Enid smiled, looking pleased with herself. “Oh, a bit of both, I’d say.”

The creature that had reared out of the lake and startled a scream out of Fran—a woman who hadn’t screamed even when she saw the ceiling of a train station transformed into a quilt of Apraxis wasps, their fat, venomous bodies pulsing—looked at her curiously through one eye as it waited for her to stop making that bizarre noise. Jonathan, standing a few yards away, tucked his hands into his pocket and watched. Some introductions went better when you didn’t interfere.

Fran stopped screaming and pressed a hand flat against her chest, catching her breath. “Lord, you startled me,” she gasped, eyes fixed on the vast gray-green shape of the beast from the lake. “What are you?”

The creature made a chirping noise that would have sounded much more appropriate coming out of a blue jay or something of the sort. Under the circumstances, it just seemed…wrong.

It was about the size of a Clydesdale horse, all things considered, although its long, snaky neck made it seem larger, made the eye want to give it more bulk to go with its serpentine improbability. It had a solid, barrel-shaped trunk, and a head like a gar, all jagged teeth and dangerous potential. Its eyes weren’t gar-like, though; they were more like the eyes Fran had seen on Gila monsters back in the desert, reptilian and old and somehow mellow, ready to accept whatever came along without getting particularly worked up about it.
The great beast didn’t have scales, although from the shape of it, it was more like a lizard than anything else she’d ever seen. Instead, it had rubbery green and gray skin.

“Well I’ve never,” said Fran, after a longer examination. She couldn’t shake the feeling that the creature had been examining her right back. At least it hadn’t attacked, or slithered back down into the lake; it must have liked what it was seeing. She half-turned and demanded, “Well, city boy? I don’t think my new friend here can talk, so that puts proper introductions on you.”

Jonathan actually laughed. “What makes you think I know what this is?”

“You’re not going for your gun, you’re not shouting for me to get away from it, and you and your folks were all very clear that this was where the family fishing trip happens. Now maybe I’m being a naïve country girl again, but I don’t think my friend here,” she pointed at the lake beast, “got this big since the last time you came fishing. That means you know what it is, and you were probably anticipating watching me get an eyeful. Eyeful gotten. Now what is it?”

“Very good deductions,” said Jonathan. “Fran, I’d like you to meet one of my favorite examples of *Dolichorhynchops mishigamaa*, better known as the ‘Michigan lake monster.’ This particular beautiful girl is Bessie.” He walked down the beachhead to the creature, stroking its—her—neck with one hand. Bessie replied by making that bizarrely tiny chirping sound again.

Fran nodded slowly. “Uh-huh. What’s that when it’s at home? Some kind of giant water-lizard?”

“They’re actually a relict population of plesiosaurs,” said Jonathan, still stroking Bessie’s neck. “We’ve discovered four different species that have managed to survive into the modern day. All unrelated, all geographically isolated. The Michigan lake monster is the most common, possibly because we have a great many lakes suitable for them.”

“So she’s a dinosaur?” Fran looked impressed. “Shoot. I never thought I’d get to meet a dinosaur.”

Bessie chirped again.

Jonathan beckoned for Fran to come closer. “Then you’d best meet this one properly. Don’t worry. She won’t bite unless you startle her.”

“You know, I’ve been married to you long enough that I know you meant for that to be reassuring,” said Fran, giving Bessie’s long, toothy head a cautious look. Then she started forward, holding her hands loosely at her sides in an effort to make herself look as non-threatening as possible. As she grew closer to the lake monster, the vital, swampy smell of her skin became obvious above the watery smell of the lake. It was a healthy-beast smell, both like and unlike the smell of frogs and salamanders. “Hello, pretty girl. I’m not here to hurt you.”

Bessie chirped, looking at Fran thoughtfully out of one large amber eye.

“Now reach out—slowly, very slowly—and put your hand against her neck,” advised Jonathan.

“Are you being serious, city boy? Or have you decided that you’re tired of being married, but not so tired of it that you want to deal with going through a divorce?”

Jonathan chuckled. “I’m quite serious, I assure you.”

“Right. Well, if she eats me, you get to explain it to your mother.” Fran reached out, with glacial slowness, and put her hand against Bessie’s neck. Bessie didn’t react. Fran’s face slowly transformed with wonder.
“She’s like a rubber balloon, but she’s warm.”

“Their skins are remarkably like the skins of whales and dolphins,” said Jonathan, stroking Bessie’s neck again. “They don’t have scales to protect them from cuts and bruises, but they’re remarkably maneuverable, and they don’t have to worry about shedding.”

“Well, I never,” said Fran, beginning to mimic his stroking motions. “Me, petting a dinosaur. Who thought I’d live to see the day?”

Jonathan just smiled.

Bessie proved to be surprisingly docile—surprising to Fran, anyway, who had always expected dinosaurs to be big, angry monsters more interested in eating the locals than having their necks petted. Jonathan, who had met Bessie several times previous, eventually just stepped back and enjoyed the sight of his wife bonding with one of his favorite monsters.

The two had been standing in silent communion for perhaps ten minutes when a belling call echoed across the lake. It was deeper and more solemn than Bessie’s chirps, and yet the two somehow shared an indefinable quality of pitch, something buried deep in the makeup of the sound. Bessie’s head went up, her snaky neck extending to its full length, before she made a long, low belling sound in answer.

The first call sounded again, and Bessie dug her front flippers into the mud, slithering back out into the water. In a matter of seconds she was gone, not even leaving ripples on the surface to mark her passing.

Jonathan walked over to stand next to Fran. “That’ll be her mate calling her back to him. They tend to get restless when they’re separated for long periods of time.”

“Oh, so you learned about women from lake monsters, did you? That explains an awful lot, you know.”

Fran slipped her damp, faintly monster-scented fingers into his, granting him one of her sweet sideways smiles. “Thanks for introducing me to her, Johnny. She’s really something.”

“She is at that,” said Jonathan, his tone implying that he was no longer strictly talking about the lake monster. He pressed a kiss against Fran’s forehead, letting his lips linger there for several seconds before he pulled back and asked, “Are you ready to go and face the disaster my folks have no doubt made of our tent?”

“May as well,” she said, and started back up the beach—but she didn’t pull her hand out of his, and when she tugged him along behind her, he went without resistance.

Enid and Alexander had finished setting up the camp some time before, and were sitting comfortably by their small, unlit fire pit when Jonathan and Fran came over the rise, their feet crackling on the fallen leaves. Enid turned and smiled at them.

“I heard the bellows,” she said. “Did Goliath come out and say hello?”

“No, Bessie,” said Jonathan. “She spent quite a while on the beach, taking Fran’s measure. I think she approved. She even let Fran pet her.”

“Oh, that is an honor,” said Alexander. “What did you think of the locals, Frannie?”

“I’ve been petting a dinosaur,” said Fran. She sounded amazed and pleased with herself at the same time,
like she could neither believe nor deny her luck. “A real dinosaur, that’s still alive, and I petted it.”

“Technically plesiosaurs aren’t dinosaurs, dear,” said Jonathan. “I didn’t correct you about that before, and I apologize if I allowed you to form any misconceptions about Bessie’s—”

Fran leaned over and kissed him, cutting off his lecture before it could get properly started.

“That’s one way to shut the boy up,” observed Alexander.

Enid just laughed.

The fishing trip was going very well so far as she was concerned.

Actually fishing in a lake filled with plesiosaurs turned out to be a somewhat complicated matter. Alexander and Enid took one end of the lake, while Johnny and Fran took the other. Both teams were equipped with a small, rectangular wooden box that made a sound like a broken kazoo when they blew into the open end.

Fran eyed the box with wary suspicion as she baited her hook. “What’s that? A lake monster call?”

“Essentially, yes,” said Jonathan, sounding pleased. “We have an agreement with the plesiosaurs. They let us fish, and in exchange, we scrub the mites and parasites off of their skin.”

“Johnny, I love you more than I’ve ever loved any other man in my life, so you’ll please excuse me when I say that you’re full of horseshit.” Fran dropped her baited hook into the water. “Not-dinosaurs are interesting animals, but they’re not people-smart. They can’t make that kind of deal.”

“No, but they can learn that if they leave us alone for a little while, we don’t take much, and then they get a full medical exam and cleaning when we’re done. They know that the parasites itch.” He lifted the lake monster call and blew into it twice, sending an eerie quacking noise drifting across the lake.

A few seconds passed before the distinctive sound of plesiosaur chirping answered him.

Jonathan smiled and put the call aside. “There, you see? They’ll stay away from this spot for at least half an hour. Plenty of time for us to catch something nice for dinner.”

“So why’re your folks at the other end of the lake if we’ve got the good fishing here?”

“We can’t quite get the plesiosaurs to herd fish onto our hooks; we’ll have better luck this way.” That, and splitting up gave him some time alone with Fran, and his parents some time alone with each other. That was more than welcome. Jonathan baited his own hook and cast his line into the water, enjoying the comfortable feeling of Fran’s hip, warm against his.

“Huh,” said Fran. “I guess you’re the expert, city boy.”

“You shouldn’t call me ‘city boy’ when we’re sitting in the middle of the wilderness, trying to catch fish for our dinner. It’s a contradiction.”

“Nuh-uh,” said Fran, sounding pleasantly amused. “The way you talk, you bring the city with you. We could be sitting on a raft in the middle of the ocean, staying alive by our wits alone, and you’d still be my city boy. Get used to it.”
“I already am, dear,” he said, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “I already am.”

Between the two pairs, they were able to catch three large trout for their dinner: not enough to leave anything over for breakfast, but respectable for a single evening’s work, especially when they considered that the lake was occupied by a population of massive predatory reptiles. Fran managed to keep her curiosity contained until the fish had been fried over the campfire and consumed on slabs of Enid’s home-baked bread. Finally, she could restrain herself no longer.

“How does nobody know they’re here?” she asked, almost petulantly. “They’re huge! Shouldn’t somebody have noticed them by now? Somebody other than you? I mean, frickens and stuff are small, I can see why no one pays attention, but this is like…like missing hippos in the reservoir!”

“If someone did see a hippopotamus in the city water supply, I wager they’d be locked up for public drunkenness before anyone actually went and looked for a hippo in the reservoir,” said Alexander. “That’s the first part of how they’ve stayed hidden: somebody says they saw a lake monster, everyone else says they saw the bottom of a beer cooler.”

“Or they panic when they see their first plesiosaur and they try to hit it, or shoot at it, or otherwise upset the creatures,” said Enid. “The plesiosaurs have their own ways of dealing with people like that.”

Fran had seen enough interactions between humans and monsters to know what those “ways” likely entailed. The bottom of White Otter Lake was doubtless littered with the bones of fishermen who had panicked when a creature from the dawn of time loomed out of the water and came after them. “So that’s a lot of people, but that’s not everybody,” she said. “How are they still here? Why isn’t this place swarming with, I dunno, scientists and newspapermen?”

“White Otter Lake is quite isolated,” said Alexander. “The family that owns the western half of the lakeshore has known about the plesiosaurs for generations. They’re not scholars of the hidden world the way that we are, but they feel that the creatures are theirs to care for. They know we come here, and we have their permission to camp for a week every year, but we’re one of the only families that has that consent.”

“The Wilsons are nicely ornery folks, and they don’t hesitate before coming to visit unwanted campers with shotguns,” said Enid, sounding completely approving of this course of action. “I don’t think they’ve ever needed to shoot anyone, but I don’t think they’d hesitate if they saw the need.”

“How are they doing?” asked Jonathan. “I know Abigail was getting over the flu the last time I came up here with you.”

Enid’s face fell. She exchanged a glance with Alexander before saying, “Abigail passed away last fall. It’s just Herbert up at the house now.”

“We should go up tomorrow to pay our respects,” said Jonathan with a frown. “He may not have realized that we’re here, and I’d rather not surprise the man, or be surprised when he comes down to run us off.”

“Abigail was always the friendly one,” Alexander explained, seeing Fran’s puzzled expression. “She didn’t like us being here, as such, but she understood we were doing the lake monsters a service. Her family built the house three generations back. They’ve been keeping watch ever since.”

“Isn’t there anyone else?” asked Fran. “Cousins, or children, or somebody who can come and help Herbert
“No,” said Enid, with a small shake of her head. “Abby used to say that she didn’t like other people’s children, so she didn’t feel like it would be right to have any of her own. Herbert, well, he had better things to worry about, like keeping people from fishing where they were likely to be eaten by prehistoric creatures from the lake.” She didn’t mention the other thing that Abby had been fond of saying—that three generations was a good run for a family that focused most of its energy on looking after monsters.

Somehow, she couldn’t see where that would have helped.

“Huh,” said Fran, leaning back so that her shoulder pressed into Jonathan’s side, cozy as a puzzle piece slotting into place. “Well, I guess it’ll do him some good to have company.”

“I think so too,” said Enid. “Now who’s up for pie?”

It had been surprisingly easy to drift off to the sound of the lake lapping against its borders and the plesiosaurs calling back and forth to one another across the water. Fran thought she had identified four distinct voices, and was straining to isolate a fifth...

…and then the sun was up and she was opening her eyes to find Jonathan propped up on one elbow, smiling warmly down at her. He was wearing an undershirt and his boxers, and she’d never seen such a beautiful man in all her life. Maybe he hadn’t started out that way, back when he was an intruding city boy and she was a trick rider with the circus, but times had changed. For the better, she thought.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” he said. “My folks have already gone to hunt us up some breakfast. I stayed behind to wake you.”

“So we’re alone in the camp?” asked Fran, wakefulness coalescing with a speed that was exceedingly rare for her. She sat up, allowing the blankets to fall away. Unlike Jonathan, she hadn’t had cause to leave the tent yet this morning, and so further unlike Jonathan, she was quite gloriously nude. “How long do you think they’ll be gone?”

Jonathan, who had been married to her long enough to know what that tone meant, grinned before pulling his undershirt off and throwing it aside. “Long enough,” he said, and put his arms around her.

Enid and Alexander actually missed “long enough” by about ten minutes—the tent was still shaking when they returned, her basket full of eggs and mushrooms, his full of tiny wild strawberries like red buttons borrowed from the forest floor. They stopped, Enid hiding a smile behind her hand, and shared a pleased look between them. For the most part, they tried not to think about what their son and daughter-in-law did or didn’t do in the bedroom, but it had been years since Daniel left them, and there had been no more children. The small sounds coming from inside the tent were hopeful ones. They meant that even if there were never any more children, even if this family of monster-chasers got two generations to the Wilsons’ three, at least the bonds between them were unbroken.

Breakfast was nearly ready when the tent flap opened and Jonathan emerged, buttoning his shirt, with a rumpled, satisfied-looking Fran close behind him. He stopped at the sight of his father stirring a mess of eggs, chopped bacon, and mushrooms in a skillet held over their fire.

“Morning, Johnny,” said Alexander amiably. “You sleep well? Or I suppose I should be asking, you sleep at
“Is that your way of saying we were making too much noise?” asked Fran, walking past her stunned husband to the cooler. “Because we could be a lot louder, if that’s what it takes.”

“Fran,” hissed Jonathan, sounding scandalized.

Fran pulled the orange juice out of the cooler and grinned at him.

“I see you slept well,” said Enid, taking the juice out of Fran’s hand. “You were both perfectly restrained, and this is the last we’ll be talking about this over breakfast, do you all understand me? We’re going to sit down on folding chairs and eat our slightly burnt eggs like civilized people.”

“Oh, yes, this is absolutely how they eat in the finest restaurants in the land,” grumbled Jonathan, walking to take a seat.

“It should be,” said Alexander. “People’d be happier if they were this well-acquainted with where their breakfasts came from.” He began spooning his egg mixture onto plates. “Fran, can you grab one of these for Johnny?”

“Sure can,” she said amiably, and picked up two plates as she walked over and sat down next to Jonathan.

Enid walked by and handed them each a fork. Fran beamed at her before asking, “So are we going to go up and meet your friend this morning? I’ll put on my nice fishing shirt.”

“You have three fishing shirts, and they all look exactly the same,” said Jonathan.

“Sure do, but only one of them will have me in it,” countered Fran, sticking a bite of scramble into his mouth to prevent him from making any further comments.

“Once we’ve eaten and done the washing-up, yes,” said Enid. “You’re going to come with us, then?”

“I figured I should, if only to keep myself off the ‘shoot on sight’ list,” said Fran. “Is that all right?”

“That’s fine,” said Alexander. “I’m certain Herbert will be pleased to meet you.”

Enid, who had been on the receiving end of more than a few of Herbert’s rants against trespassers, didn’t look so sure.

They made their way through the forest to the house on the hill overlooking the lake during the cool, lazy hours between their late breakfast and what they anticipated as the time for lunch. The plesiosaurs occasionally bellowed or chirped from the lake below, adding a surreal soundtrack to their march.

Fran paused at one point, frowning up into the trees. Jonathan slowed down, looking at her with concern.

“Is something wrong?”

“Are there normally frickens around here?” she asked. She dropped her eyes to his, and added, “I haven’t heard one since we left the area just outside the lake. It seems odd, don’t you think? This is good fricken country. They should be thick as crows on carrion.”

Jonathan stopped walking altogether, trying to focus on what he was hearing—or rather, not hearing—from
Branches rubbed against branches. Leaves rustled. Somewhere, a squirrel ran along a tree trunk, its feet scrabbling for purchase on the bark. Somewhere else, a deer stepped delicately through the undergrowth. But…

"Where are the frickens?"

"That’s what I was asking,” said Fran. “I thought they were everywhere in Michigan.”

“They are. We’ve seen three species here on previous visits. They’re shy, but they’re noisy.”

“Something must have frightened them,” said Alexander as he rejoined the group. “As to what that could have been… I’m afraid that I don’t know. Frickens are skittish when they’re not accustomed to people. Maybe our presence is enough to make them stop singing.”

“Then they should be starting up again behind us,” said Fran.

All four of them paused to listen this time. No frickens sang in the trees behind them.

Enid frowned. “One more thing to ask Herbert about,” she said. “Come along.”

There were no further stops as they walked through the wood to the house at the top of the hill. It was old, rickety and uncared-for, with the peeling paint and bleached out wood of a home that had been loved once, when times were better and more care could be spent on its upkeep. The porch sagged, seeming to melt down into the steps. Fran stopped dead some ten feet away.

“Is this a haunted house?” she demanded. “Because this feels like one of those situations where we walk inside and then we’re in a campfire story to tell to little kids. One of those ones that ends with ‘and they were never seen again.’”

“It’s not haunted, just decrepit,” said Jonathan, sounding distracted. He pointed to the driveway, saying, “Mother, is that Herbert’s car?”

Enid looked where he was pointing and frowned. “No. Herbert drives a beat-up old blue truck that’s about half rust from being kept near the water.” The car in the driveway was glossy black and obviously new; it had probably rolled off the showroom floor in Detroit less than a year before. “Maybe he has company.”

“If he does, it’s the first time,” said Alexander. He walked gingerly over to the sagging steps, waving for the others to stay where they were as he climbed up to the equally unsteady-looking porch. Nothing broke or gave way beneath his feet, which seemed like something of a miracle. Looking a little less nervous now that he had reached his destination without severe injury, Alexander raised his hand and knocked on the front door.

“It could take a few minutes for Herbert to answer,” said Enid. “His hearing isn’t what it used to—” She stopped speaking as the door swung open, and a person stepped out onto the porch, an artificial smile plastered across his face.
“Hello,” said the stranger, eyes flicking to the three people standing on the ground in front of the house before his gaze settled more firmly on Alexander. He was young, maybe a few years younger than Jonathan, with sandy blond hair and a certain sharpness to his motions that implied the potential for violence, if he felt that he was being pushed. His clothing was well-cut and clearly expensive, but at the same time designed for easy movement and durability. “May I help you?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. …?”

The man didn’t respond. He just raised his eyebrows and waited for Alexander to continue.

“Right.” Alexander stood up a little straighter, his own demeanor shifting to match the stranger’s coolness. “We’re here to see Herbert Wilson, the owner of this house. Is he available?”

“I’m sorry, but Uncle Herbert has been very ill recently,” said the man. “My wife and I are taking care of the property while he’s in the hospital recuperating.”

Alexander gave the man a hard, assessing look. “I see. And did your uncle tell you about the specific ecological needs of this area?”

“Ah. If you’re talking like that, you must be the Healys. He told me about you.” The man smiled thinly. “He said that if you showed up, we were to allow you to camp by the lake, as you would do no harm, but could be very good for the health of his pet monsters. Welcome then, Healys. I’m assuming that your sense of neighborly duty brought you here on your first day?” When Alexander nodded, he continued, “Splendid. You have three more, and then I’ll thank you to get off of our property. We have things to do, and we’d rather not be tripping over strangers in the woods while we’re trying to get them done.”

“That’s right hospitable of you,” said Alexander. “Thank you for not running us off immediately.”

“Oh, believe me, we would, but Uncle Herbert might still recover, and I’d rather not have a fight with the old coot about chasing away his naturalist friends.” The man spoke with an easy arrogance, like what he was saying was somehow perfectly reasonable, and not horrible at all.

Fran didn’t have much patience for rude people—never had done, never would do. “Can we at least get your name?” she demanded, taking a step forward. “I’d hate to run into your uncle later and find out that you’d been lying to us about your relation to the man.”

He turned a frown on her. “Which one are you?”

“Juney,” Fran lied smoothly. “Youngest. And you are?”

“Paul,” the man replied. “Now if you’d all excuse me, I have work to do, and I’m sure you’re eager to get back to your camp. Good day.” He turned and went back inside with no more of a farewell than that, slamming the door behind himself. The old house seemed to settle deeper into its foundations, protesting the rough treatment.

Alexander frowned thoughtfully as he walked down the porch steps to rejoin the others. “I had no idea,” he said. “Herbert never said anything about a nephew.”

“Oh, that’s because he hasn’t got one,” said Fran blithely.

The other three turned to blink at her. She shrugged.

“If this fella was supposed to know enough from his uncle to know who all of you were, how come he
believed I was a daughter, and not a daughter-in-law? He doesn’t have the kind of details you’d have if somebody told you that folk you weren’t supposed to shoot might show up on your land.” Fran cast a glance back at the house. “I don’t know who he is, but he’s not related to your friend.”

“Ah,” said Alexander. “Well, then, I suppose that means we have a problem.”

The four of them returned quickly to their camp. There was much to do, and suddenly it seemed like there wasn’t going to be enough time to do it all.

The frickens never resumed their song.

An hour later, Alexander and Enid were back in the truck, heading toward the nearest town large enough to support both a hospital and a newspaper. Once there, they could split up to check both the patient wards and the recent obituaries. The possibility that Herbert was dead couldn’t be ignored, and it could change how they handled things going forward. Johnny and Fran, meanwhile, were walking the edge of the lake, looking for any sign that the plesiosaurs had been interfered with or threatened by their current custodians.

“He called them ‘monsters,’” said Jonathan for the fifth time. His scowl seemed to have become permanent, sinking down into the muscles of his face until it bonded with the bone. “How could anyone call such beautiful creatures ‘monsters’?”

“It’s pretty easy, city boy; you open your mouth and the words come out.” Fran walked along a fallen log, arms held out for balance as she tried to avoid taking a tumble into the frigid waters of White Otter Lake. “I would’ve called them monsters, once upon a time. You’re the one who taught me better.”

“But even back then, you wouldn’t have said it like that.” Jonathan was unwilling to let the point go. That was unlike him; he usually dismissed things quickly, choosing to act rather than dwelling on what was already behind them. “He said it like it was…like it was an insult. He turned it into a slur against their very existence. These are beautiful, incredible creatures that deserve our protection and respect. How can anyone look at them and not see that?”

“Well, they do have an awful lot of teeth,” said Fran. In the distance, a plesiosaur bellowed. She supposed she could have mistaken the sound for a lonely moose belling for a mate if she hadn’t already known the lake was full of prehistoric not-actually-dinosaurs. “That would be a little surprising if you weren’t expecting it.”

As if on cue, Bessie lifted her head out of the water, making an inquisitive chirping noise. She had a trout hanging from the side of her mouth, its tail flapping in a way that was either comic or sad, depending on whether or not you were the trout.

Fran managed not to fall off her log, but it was a close thing. “As I was saying,” she said dryly, indicating Bessie with a sweep of her hand. “There are people who could take that the wrong way.”

“They’re in Herbert’s house.” Jonathan walked over to Bessie, leaning up to scratch the underside of her jaw. She responded by swallowing her trout and letting her mouth hang slightly open, showing yet more teeth as she closed her eyes and leaned into his scratching. “They should know not to call them monsters.”

“Sometimes I think your upbringing has blinded you a bit to what the rest of the world sees when they look at your precious beasts, city boy,” said Fran fondly, as she watched her husband petting the plesiosaur.
“You’re right that they shouldn’t be the ones looking after them if that’s how they feel, but I really do think you need to consider that not everyone sees the world the way that you do.”

Jonathan looked back to her, expression hurt. “Then everyone else is blind.”

“Yes, I rather do think that they are,” said Fran.

Bessie abruptly jerked away from Jonathan’s hand, making a startled little lowing noise, and retreated into the water. It was a fast, graceless descent: rings spread out to mark the place where she had been, and Jonathan’s trousers were summarily soaked. He blinked. Fran frowned.

And an auburn-haired woman in denim trousers and a heavy canvas shirt burst out of the trees and onto the lakefront. She was brandishing a tranquilizer rifle, the butt braced against her shoulder as she prepared to take a shot at something that was no longer there. “Damn!” she swore, lowering her rifle, and turned to direct a poisonous glare at Jonathan and Fran. “What’s wrong with you two idiots? You could have kept the blasted thing where it was for another half-minute!”

“Uh, excuse me?” said Fran.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Jonathan. His posture had shifted upon her arrival, becoming closed-off and formal. It was like watching a door swing closed. Even Fran, who had seen this transformation before, found it disturbing to watch. Johnny Healy, family man on vacation, was gone. In his place was Jonathan Healy, biologist and monster hunter—and far less forgiving than his counterpart.

“The damn dinosaur,” the woman snapped. “Aren’t you those Healy people Paul said were skulking around the lake? The things like you, we know they do. All you had to do was keep it out of the water for another few seconds and—”

“And what?” asked Fran, with deceptive cheerfulness. “You’d have shot the poor thing for the crime of being bigger than you?”

The woman paused, catching the warning implicit in Fran’s tone. Tread lightly, it said: you will not enjoy what happens if you go too far. “This is a tranquilizer gun,” she said, in the tone of voice usually reserved for speaking to elderly relatives and very small children. “I wouldn’t have hurt the beast, just slowed it down long enough for me to take some important measurements and vital signs. You’re supposed to be scientists, aren’t you? Why wouldn’t you want me to conduct science?”

Fran had always hated people who behaved as if kids and old folks couldn’t understand proper English. She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes, all but smoldering with irritation. Jonathan hastened to step in front of her, blocking her direct access to the stranger. It seemed like the best way to prevent a drowning.

“The creatures that live in this lake have been measured and monitored for years, using far less direct methods,” he said, in what was meant to be a soothing tone. “They’re unaccustomed to violence, and I’m afraid that they can’t distinguish between a tranquilizer gun and a gun which shoots actual bullets. You could have been hurt had your first shot failed to fell the beast.”

The woman blinked. Apparently, she hadn’t been expecting anything that sounded that reasonable. Raising her rifle so that it pointed at the sky rather than presenting a danger to her new companions, she asked, “What would you suggest?”

“I’d suggest you take your behind back up to the house where you’re squatting, pack your things, and get the hell out of here,” said Fran, poking her head around Jonathan. “Hanging out around the lake is a good way to wind up eaten.”
"I’m sorry, there seems to be some confusion," said the woman. “Paul and I aren’t squatting. That’s my uncle’s house. We’re here on his invitation while he recuperates. Your accent, that’s what, Arizona? New Mexico, maybe? Well, out here in the civilized parts of the country, sometimes we ask family to help us out. Do you have families in the heathen west?"

“Don’t kill her, dear, it would be incredibly messy and I don’t feel like trying to hide the evidence,” said Jonathan wearily.

“Oh, there’d be no evidence.” Fran stepped up beside him, the smile back on her face. That wasn’t actually a good sign. “This many giant lizards around, it’d be a snap to convince something that it wanted to eat a lady who insulted my sense of family.”

“What my dear wife means to say is that she has a family, clearly, as she is here with her family,” said Jonathan. “And while I understand that an ailing relative can be quite stressful, you must realize that Mr. Wilson never told us anything about a nephew, or a niece for that matter, and it seemed like an odd omission when we arrived and discovered that he had houseguests.”

“My mother was his sister,” said the woman. “That makes him my uncle and Paul’s uncle by marriage. I’m not sure I’m the one who needs to be providing her bona fides right now, since you’re the strangers who just showed up claiming to be some batty biologist friends of Uncle Herbert’s. How do we know you’re even the Healys?”

“Because nobody’s stupid enough to pretend to be us,” said Fran.

Jonathan winced. “Blunt, yes, but also accurate. We’re not the most well-regarded biologists in certain circles. You can be confident that no one who wanted to be taken seriously would be claiming relation.”

“Oh, great, so you’re quacks.” The woman actually looked disgusted. “What good are a bunch of quacks going to do me?”

“Well, that depends,” said Fran. “What good were you looking to have done?”

The woman glared at her for a moment more before shaking her head, muttering something uncomplimentary under her breath, and stomping off into the brush, leaving Jonathan and Fran alone on the lakeshore.

It was Fran who broke the silence, saying, “I think they’re hunters. I think they’re here looking for a payday.”

“I’m terribly afraid that you’re right,” said Jonathan. He cast a worried look at the water. Bessie was showing no signs of resurfacing. That was a small mercy, considering everything else that was happening. “Come on. I want to finish circling the lake before my parents get back. After the conversation we just had, I don’t trust there not to be traps.”

There were traps.

Not many of them, no, and Jonathan was reasonably sure none of them would have actually worked—the bear trap was too small, the pit trap was too far inland, and the snare was not only made of rope that would snap if a plesiosaur actually triggered it, it was baited with pinecones, which the great beasts didn’t eat—but that wasn’t the issue. The issue was that traps had been set in the first place.
“They’re clever beasts, but they’re just that: beasts,” he explained to Fran, as the two of them shoveled dirt back into the pit trap. “They can be caught just like anything else, especially when they’re not expecting a change in their environment. They’ve never had to deal with trappers before. This is a drastic and dangerous change for them.”

“We could shoot them,” Fran suggested.

Jonathan didn’t need to be told that she was talking about the squatters in Herbert’s house, and not about the plesiosaurs. “I wish we could,” he said, with sincere regret. “Unfortunately, we don’t know who knows that they’re here. We could wind up causing more trouble than we get rid of, both for the plesiosaurs and for ourselves.”

“Then I got nothing,” said Fran, pushing another double-handful of dirt into the hole before straightening up and dusting her hands against the butt of her jeans. “You use bullets on cattle rustlers and poachers. I can’t see why you shouldn’t treat dinosaur rustlers the same way.”

“Because dinosaurs, unlike cattle, are not protected by American law,” said Jonathan. “And they’re not dinosaurs, they’re plesiosaurs.”

“This doesn’t seem like a good time to be an encyclopedia, darling,” said Fran. She glared at the edge of the wood, like she was daring it to produce the woman with the tranquilizer rifle a second time. “It does seem like a good time for breaking noses, if you feel like getting your hands dirty.”

“If those people are in Mr. Wilson’s house legally—”

“Everything’s about the law with you today, isn’t it?” Fran turned her glare on her husband. “What do you want us to do, just go back to camp and pretend nobody’s hunting your big ol’ not-a-dinosaurs? They’re sweet beasts, they’re not going to deal too well with this.”

“They’re very effective hunters, and they defend themselves well from challenges that they understand, but none of these traps fall into that category.” Jonathan reached up and adjusted his glasses, glancing nervously at the water. No plesiosaurs had appeared since they reached the far side of the lake. “They have a very small population. It’s managed to remain stable thus far, but that’s because they have no predators and a very low birth rate. Add predators to that equation…”

“And the lack of babies becomes a death sentence,” said Fran softly.

Jonathan knew she was thinking of their own empty nursery, their own lack of babies: since Daniel had died they hadn’t been exactly careful about their marital activities, but there had been no more children. He sometimes suspected Fran of brewing one of his mother’s special teas, the ones she’d used when she needed to accompany his father into the field without worrying about accidents. He’d never quite screwed up the courage to ask. Their marriage had healed after the loss of their son—not without scars, no, but then, neither of them had been exactly unscarred before—but there were some questions capable of leaving wounds that no amount of time or care would ever heal.

“We need to get back to camp,” he said, blurtting out the words before anything less appropriate could take their place. “I don’t know if my parents will have returned from town, but we should be there when they do. They’ll want to know about this.”

“What about the not-dinosaurs?” asked Fran, with another glance at the water.

“They’ve survived this long, and Bessie was clearly afraid of the woman we met before. I think they’ll be all right for a little bit longer.”
“If you’re sure…”

“That’s the trouble, Fran,” said Jonathan. “I’m not.”

The lakeshore remained silent and empty as they turned and walked back toward their camp. If anything watched them, either from the wood or from the water, it gave no indication that it was there.

The sound of the truck rattling over the uneven ground was more welcome than Enid and Alexander could have possibly known. They returned to the camp to find Jonathan building up the fire. There was no sign of Fran. He looked up, answering their unspoken question with a clipped, “She went hunting for something more substantial than fish. I think she’s afraid of going near the water and attracting the plesiosaurs. We had some company during our walk earlier.”

“What kind of company?” asked Enid.

“The kind that carries a tranquilizer rifle and yells at us for not keeping Bessie on dry land long enough for her to be shot,” said Jonathan. He bent back over the fire. “Female, auburn hair, looks to be about my age, give or take five years, depending on what kind of life she’s led. She claimed her mother was Mr. Wilson’s sister, making him her biological uncle and giving her a valid reason for being on the family property. The man we met before is apparently her husband. How did your trip go?”

“Well, we did manage to confirm that Herbert had a sister, although nobody’s seen her in years, but that’s about the only thing we confirmed,” said Alexander. He sounded frustrated. Given the circumstances, it was difficult for any of them to blame him. “As it stands, we only learned that much because the woman working the desk at the newspaper was a gossip. Half the town probably knows that Herbert’s missing now.”

“Missing?” Jonathan straightened up, frowning. “He’s not in the hospital?”

“No, and he hasn’t passed away. Until we came into town looking for him, no one had realized that it wasn’t all business as usual.” Enid’s frown hardened into a scowl. “I realize he’s a bit of a hermit, but you’d think someone would have noticed that he wasn’t picking up groceries anymore, and that two strangers had been hanging about for weeks.”

“How long have they been here?”

For the first time, Alexander actually looked somewhat pleased with himself. “We asked ourselves the same question. Since the hospital was no help, and the newspaper was no help, we went to the one place that would know for sure how long it had been since anyone had seen Herbert: the grocer’s.”

Jonathan laughed mirthlessly as he saw the elegance of his father’s solution. “Ask the man whose livelihood is tied to the locals how long it’s been since he’s seen someone. Nicely done.”

“Thank you,” said Alexander. “Sadly, the news wasn’t as good as we’d been hoping. It would have been easy to roust these ‘relatives’ if they’d been here for only a few days, but according to what we found in the town, they’ve been here for at least a month. That’s assuming they’re the reason Herbert stopped going to the market for milk and tobacco.”

“It’s a fair assumption,” said Jonathan. “Let me tell you what we found…”

He was describing the pit trap that he and Fran had filled with soil when Fran herself stepped into the
clearing, with two dead rabbits slung over her shoulder. She stopped to listen to the rest of his recitation, waiting until he was done before she cleared her throat and added, “What Johnny didn’t say is that I was in favor of marching right back up to the house and shooting a few dinosaur rustlers. It’s illegal to do that to a man’s cattle, it should be illegal to do it to a man’s pet monsters.”

“Sadly, the law is less enlightened,” said Alexander, eyeing the rabbits appreciatively. “Rabbit stew for dinner?”

“That was the plan,” said Fran. “I left the guts a ways back. Maybe we’ll get lucky and one of the rustlers’ll step in them.”

“Now Fran,” said Jonathan mildly. “The people may be pond scum, but their footwear has never done anything to harm you.”

Fran wrinkled her nose at him as she walked over to Alexander and handed him the rabbits. “Is there anything I can do to help you get them ready?”

“You caught them; that’s enough,” Alexander said. “If you really must do more, wild carrots and screaming yams both grow in this area. See if you can find some for us to add to the pot.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Jonathan, rising. The two of them shortly vanished into the trees, leaving the elder Healy’s alone in the campsite.

“This isn’t good, Alex,” said Enid.

“No, it’s not,” he agreed, pulling out one of his knives. “Let’s get started on dinner. I have the feeling it’s going to be a long night.”

It didn’t take Fran and Jonathan long to find the wild carrots Alexander had mentioned. The screaming yams were a bit more trouble—as was only natural for a vegetable capable of uprooting itself and running away when it felt threatened—and after the fourth yam had escaped capture, they settled for gathering some ramps that Jonathan had spotted growing alongside a patch of ostrich fern. That, along with a few stalks of wild mallow, would more than thicken up the stew.

“How long did it take you to learn everything in these woods that you could eat?” asked Fran as they walked back toward the camp.

“My parents started teaching me when I was four or five,” he said. “It was a game at first—identify the plant, guess the name of the bird, remember where the wild onions grow. It got more serious as I got older. I suppose I realized that they were preparing me to survive by any means necessary when I was twelve or so, and they finally taught me just how much the Covenant hated us.”

“That’s a lot to put on a little boy.”

“How young were you when you started learning how to ride?” Jonathan asked mildly.

Fran paused. “Four or five,” she finally admitted. “I guess everyone puts a lot on their kids.”

“It’s the way of the world.” Jonathan leaned over to kiss her temple. “But we do all right, I think. As long as we stick together, we do all right.”
Fran was opening her mouth to answer him when she stopped, shoulders going suddenly tight. Jonathan took a half-step more before he stopped as well. He looked at her curiously. She pointed up into the trees above them, and he frowned as he finally understood her meaning:

The frickens had stopped again.

“You can come out now,” he said, pitching his voice so that it would carry into the wood around them. “We’re not afraid of you, and we would greatly prefer to do this like civilized adults, assuming that it must be done at all.”

A branch broke in the wood off to his left. He turned, frowning. The basket of wild vegetables was impeding his shooting arm; a bad decision, all things considered, but not one that he had made expecting to be facing a shootout in the woods. That was foolish, he silently chided himself. You knew that they were out here. True enough. He also knew that he was with his wife, and while he was an excellent shot, her knives were sometimes even faster.

“You certainly are bold for people who could be thrown off our land at any time,” said a male voice, and Paul—assuming that was actually his name—stepped into view. He was carrying a shotgun.

“I’d be very interested in watching you try,” said Fran pleasantly. Jonathan glanced in her direction, unsurprised to find that her hands were suddenly full of knives.

“I think we could manage,” said the woman from the lakeside, stepping out of the trees to their right.

Jonathan’s frown deepened. “You were following us,” he accused. “We have permission to camp on these lands. There’s no reason for you to be stalking us around the forest.”

“There’s every reason, you mean,” said the woman. “Those things in the lake seem to like you. You’ll bring them out for us sooner or later, or you’ll decide to protect them and you’ll leave.”

“That’s about the most ‘I am the bad guy’ I’ve ever heard a bad guy actually be,” said Fran, sounding baffled. “Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s true,” said Paul. “If you stay, we’ll follow you until you bring those things in the lake up to the surface for us. If you go, we’ll have plenty of time to find another way to get them out of the water. We win either way, but this way, no matter which you choose, you know you’re helping us.”

The woman smiled. “Neat, isn’t it? We figured it would make you miserable, and maybe then you’d get out of our hair sooner.”

“Rustlers,” murmured Fran, almost too softly for Jonathan to hear.

“I really don’t recommend taunting my wife,” he said. “She’s very fond of the creatures in the lake, and she can be a touch difficult when riled.”

“There’s two of us and we both have guns,” said Paul. “I’m not overly concerned.”

Jonathan sighed. “No, of course you’re not. Look, maybe we’re all on the same side here. Why do you want the things in the lake? If it’s for research purposes—”

“There’s twenty traveling carnivals in this part of the country,” said Paul, cutting him off. “More, if you count the circuses and the pure freak shows. And then there’s Ripley’s, the amusement parks, the museums—Uncle Herbert’s been sitting on a gold mine for years, refusing to let anyone get close enough to go
prospecting. He’s a stupid old man who doesn’t deserve the fortune he’s leaving to swim around in his lake. We can make much better use of it.”

“Alive or dead doesn’t matter,” added the woman. “A stuffed beastie is still a beastie, and people will pay to have a look at it. People are predictable like that.”

Jonathan nodded slowly. “So you’re planning to kill them. Maybe the last relict population of plesiosaurs left in the world, and you’re going to hunt them for sport. No, worse than sport; for profit.”

Paul smiled brightly. “I knew you were a smart fellow. You’ve managed to grasp the idea quite nicely.”

“I don’t think we can let you do that,” said Fran.

“I don’t think you have a choice, sweetie,” said the woman. “We’re here legally, and you’re here because it amuses us to watch you try to decide how you’re going to help us get what we want. You can’t go to the police, because the monsters aren’t real. Make them real, and we’ll just have more bidders. You’re stuck. We win. Admit it.”

Fran tilted her head slowly to the side, expression going calculating and cold. Jonathan didn’t move at all. Everything seemed to stop for a moment, at least for the two of them, as they assessed the situation and came, finally, to a mutual, if unspoken, conclusion about how to best proceed.

“You’re quite right,” said Jonathan. “You win. We have no defenses against you, and no way of proving our case to the authorities, assuming we were willing to reveal the location of the lake to anyone who was not already aware. Your removing one or more of the creatures will not result in the extinction of the species. You are victorious, and my parents are waiting for us to return with the rest of the vegetables for our supper. If you don’t mind, we should be going.”

“Besides, it’s rude to gloat in front of a lady,” said Fran. “The sooner we’re gone, the sooner you can get started.” She linked her arm back through Jonathan’s, and together the two walked off into the forest. Jonathan tensed slightly, waiting to be shot in the back. It didn’t happen, and they walked safely on.

When they had gone far enough that they wouldn’t be overheard, Fran murmured, “We’re going to smash their teeth in, right?”

“Oh yes, dear,” he said. “Absolutely.”

Her smile would have made a strong man’s blood run cold. “Good,” she said.

Jonathan regaled his parents with the encounter in the wood as Fran chopped vegetables and added them to the stew. Alexander had done an excellent job of butchering and lightly browning the rabbit; all that remained was to add the rest of the ingredients and let the fire have an hour or two to work. Enid made lemonade as she listened, a frown seeming permanently etched on her face.

Fran looked up when Jonathan was done, and asked, “Can they really do that? Can they really take a dinosaur out of the lake and just sell it to somebody like that?”

“Nobody’s going to stop them,” said Alexander. “It’s a damned if you do, damned if you don’t. If we conceal the wonders of the natural world for their own protection—both from the Covenant and from people like these—then there’s no law to keep them safe when situations like this one inevitably arise. If they
were cows or horses, or even pets, this would be poaching. As it stands, you can’t poach what doesn’t exist to begin with.”

Fran muttered something under her breath and went back to chopping ramps for the stew.

“Is there any reason we shouldn’t shoot them and throw their bodies in the lake?” asked Jonathan. “I’m sure Bessie and the others would be happy to take care of the evidence.”

“While it’s always good for a mother’s heart to hear her child sounding so bloodthirsty, there are problems with that plan,” said Enid. “We don’t know who knows they’re here. They may be telling the truth. Herbert may have given them permission to be on his property—and unlike plesiosaurs, horrible people are protected by the law. More’s the pity.”

“So we’re back to needing to find Mr. Wilson in order to proceed,” said Jonathan. “I realize this is probably a case of my stating the obvious, but we should move quickly. These two don’t strike me as the patient type, and if our presence brings the plesiosaurs out of the water…”

“Somebody’s going to get shot,” said Alexander grimly. “I agree with you, Johnny: we need to sort this out. We know Herbert hasn’t been seen in town for a month. We know he’s not in the hospital. So either they’ve killed him, and we can stop worrying about anyone knowing that they’re here, or they’ve got him up in the house.”

“They have guns,” noted Enid. “We can’t just walk up to the front door and demand to see him. Somebody’ll do something stupid, and someone will wind up getting shot.” Her tone made it clear that she wasn’t overly concerned about one of her people being on the receiving end of a bullet.

“No, but they really, really want to bag themselves a dinosaur,” said Fran, dumping the last of the ramps into the pot. “I bet if one of us goes down to the lake—maybe two of us, we don’t want them thinking they can try anything—we can lure them down there and leave the house unguarded. After all, they don’t get paid for keeping an old man locked in the attic. They get paid for bringing in a lake monster.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” said Alexander. “Johnny, you and your mother will take the house. You’re better with locks than I am, and she’s our best tracker. She’ll be able to figure out if he’s in there faster than Fran or I could, and she’s good enough backup that I won’t worry about you in there.”

“I take it that means you’ll be heading down to the lake with Fran?” asked Jonathan, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s the plan, assuming she doesn’t object.” He turned to his daughter-in-law. “Care to help me vex some rustlers, dear?”

Fran smiled brightly. “And here I thought you forgot my birthday.”

Alexander laughed.

It seemed unwise to approach the house directly: none of them were sure how long it would take for Paul and his nameless accomplice to figure out that something was happening down by the water, and the last thing they wanted to do was get caught before the plan could be put properly into motion. Alexander and Fran had made their way toward the water, guns concealed in their clothing and large hunks of stale bread carried in the vegetable basket to lure the plesiosaurs to the surface faster. Enid and Jonathan waited in the bushes behind the house, bodies low to the ground, listening.
The sound of a plesiosaur lowing drifted up from the lake, followed by the sound of a door slamming and footsteps running across the porch. Jonathan started to straighten. Enid put out one hand, stopping him before he could come fully out of his crouch. He glanced at her, and she shook her head, signaling for him to wait.

Enid Healy had survived more ambushes and outright battles than he ever hoped to see. Jonathan hankered back down, watching his mother and waiting for the sign to move.

Seconds ticked by, each one stretching like a drop of honey until it seemed like time itself was standing still. Finally, just as he thought he might scream from the frustration of it all, Enid rose, drawing the pistol from her belt, and began walking calmly toward the house. She didn’t hunch over or move with any particular caution; anyone who saw her would have assumed that she had every right in the world to be where she was. But there was no one to see. The sound of the house’s illegitimate occupants crashing through the trees had faded, and the song of the frickens once more filled the early evening air.

The front door was locked. Enid paused, tilting her head as she considered it. “Now why is it, do you think, that two folks in the middle of nowhere who believe that we’re all down by the lake would take the time to lock their door?”

“That’s easy enough,” said Jonathan, producing a lock pick from his pocket and waving for his mother to step aside. She moved easily out of the way, half-turning to watch the approach to the house while he knelt and started working on the tumblers. “The only reason to lock your door in a situation like this is if you’re trying to keep something in, rather than keeping something out.”

“I wonder what that might be,” murmured Enid.

The lock clicked free and Jonathan straightened, pushing the door open with one hand. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

Enid smiled.

Bessie had been the first plesiosaur to emerge from the water. Fran was pleased to realize that she could recognize the prehistoric beastie, telling her easily apart from the other heads that snaked up out of the water and blinked at her with enormous golden eyes. Their mottling was distinctive, once you adjusted yourself to looking at it the correct way, and she could no more have confused the great beasts for one another than she could have misidentified the Aeslin mice that came to her room for their nightly observances.

“We should’ve brought the mice,” she said, passing a chunk of stale bread to Bessie, who made it disappear with a single almost dainty motion. “They would’ve loved this.”

“We’ve never brought them here,” said Alexander, handing her another chunk of bread. He smiled as she offered it to Bessie. “They’d make it a ritual and want to come back every year, and they wouldn’t understand when we told them that it was too risky to take them into the woods. Lots of snakes and foxes here. Lots of things that think of a mouse as a tasty treat.”

“I guess I can see the logic, but that isn’t going to make me like it,” said Fran with a small pout. “It’d just be so damn cute, you know?”

“I do indeed.” A branch broke from somewhere inside the nearby brush. Had it been an animal, it would
have been followed by more sounds: rustling leaves and snapping twigs. Alexander smiled a little. “Speaking of company, I think we may have some.”

“About time,” said Fran. She took the basket of bread and started wading into the lake. The plesiosaurs followed her, the ones that had beached themselves returning to the shallows and the ones that had been waiting in the shallows slipping a little further out into the deeps.

It was the sort of bait no rustler could resist. “Hey!” Paul and his nameless accomplice burst from the bushes, he with a tranquilizer rifle in his hands, her holding the shotgun. “You get away from our monsters!”

“Do you have a bill of sale on these beasties?” asked Alexander, dropping into the thickest British accent he could manage after all his years of living in Michigan. He turned to face the pair, his hands empty and an intentionally befuddled expression on his face. If their suspicions were correct and these two were holding Herbert captive, they were probably used to dealing with helpless old men. “They certainly look like their own creatures to us. No man owns nature unless nature lets him, after all.”

“That’s pure foolishness,” snapped the woman. “A thing belongs to the person that takes it. Get out of the way before somebody gets hurt.”

Behind him, Bessie lowed, and Fran laughed. It was a bright, musical sound, and it put steel in Alexander’s spine. What he did here, he did for the girls who loved monsters, and the monsters who were worthy of their love.

“I don’t believe I will,” he said.

Paul snarled and stepped forward, taking one hand off his rifle to grab Alexander’s shoulder. He doubtless intended to shove the older man aside, giving himself a clear line on the plesiosaurs that still swam in the water just offshore. They were close enough that they could be tranquilized and removed from the lake before they drowned. He wasn’t going to let some codger mess up this perfect opportunity.

As soon as Paul’s hand touched him, Alexander moved. His hands gripped the younger man’s wrist, twisting just so as he gave a yank, pulling Paul toward him. From there, it was very little trouble to plant a knee in Paul’s kidney, eliciting a startled grunt of pain and knocking him off balance. Before either Paul or his companion had a chance to react, Paul was standing with his back pressed to Alexander’s chest and Alexander’s arm locked around his neck like an iron bar.

The woman gaped at the two of them for a moment before narrowing her eyes and raising her shotgun. “You let him go right now,” she said.

“I don’t believe you fully understand the situation,” said Alexander, giving Paul’s throat a squeeze to punctuate his words. Paul made a small, strangled noise. “If you fire, there’s a good chance you’ll hit your friend here. Is that really what you want to do? We’re a long way from the hospital. Odds are he’d bleed out right here by the lake, and the plesiosaurs would have a feast.”

“I’ll shoot the girl!” The woman gestured wildly toward the lake. “You’re not the only one who can use people as weapons!”

“No, I’m not, but it seems that I am the only one who actually pays attention to his surroundings, rather than letting himself be sucked into a distraction.” This time when Alexander tightened his grip, he didn’t relax it again. Paul kicked, fingers clawing uselessly at Alexander’s arm. “Go ahead and take a shot at the girl. I’d love to see you try.”

The woman’s eyes widened as she realized what he was saying. She spun, aiming her shotgun at the last
place she had seen Fran—but Fran, who had been a trick rider when she was younger, and who had never met a horse she didn’t dream of running with—was already well past the center of the lake, her knees clasping the back of Bessie’s neck and her arms thrust joyfully into the air as she rode away.

“Amazing, isn’t she?” asked Alexander, releasing his grip on Paul, who collapsed in a boneless heap at his feet. The woman whirled back toward him. His pistol was already in his hand, aimed squarely at her chest. He was smiling. “That’s my daughter-in-law. Now what say you and I have a little chat?”

Herbert Wilson’s house smelled of dust and rotten food, like it hadn’t been given a proper cleaning in weeks, if not longer. Enid’s nose wrinkled as she glanced around the front hall, quickly identifying all the items which were out of place. Muddy boots on the floor; a plate of dried-out sandwich crusts sitting on the stairs. “They’re not living here like guests,” she said, keeping her voice quiet in case there was a third member of the little gang. “They’re squatting.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” asked Jonathan, scanning the area a bit more thoroughly. “If they’re not here with Mr. Wilson’s consent, it becomes easier to be rid of them.”

“Without killing them?” Enid shook her head. “This isn’t going to become easy any time soon. But first we need to find Mr. Wilson, assuming he’s here. You take the basement. I’ll head up to the attic.”

Jonathan nodded. “The door’s in the kitchen?”

“No, Mother,” she confirmed. “Shoot anything that looks dangerous.”

“Yes, Mother,” he said, and turned to go, pulling the pistol from his belt as he walked. Behind him, Enid started up the stairs, heading for the second floor and the ladder to the attic.

Searching the entire house would have been more logical, but nowhere near so efficient. If the rustlers—a good word for them, although Enid would have preferred “poachers,” given their intentions—thought there was any chance that they’d be visited by the locals, they’d want to keep Herbert out of sight and out of shouting range. The attic was open, and had lots of places where a man could be chained up away from the window. As for the basement, well. It was perpetually damp and would be an unhealthy place to keep a human being for more than a night or two, but anyone locked away down there would be safely out of view.

She just hoped they hadn’t killed the poor old man. If they had, there would be no choices left: they’d have to die. She didn’t like killing humans. It left a bad taste in her mouth, the remnants of her old Covenant training rising up and telling her that she was choosing monsters over her own kind.

Enid shrugged the thought away. She’d chosen monsters over her own kind years ago. Monsters were often the better men, after all.

Opening the door that concealed the ladder to the attic, she began to climb.

“Mister, I don’t think you and I have anything to talk about.” The unnamed woman’s hands were shaking, making it difficult for her to keep her shotgun up. “This is my uncle’s land. I’m calling the sheriff as soon as I get back to the house.”
“What’s your name, girl?” Alexander’s pistol stayed steady, and his words were perfectly calm, like they were having a conversation over tea and cookies. “I know your husband’s, but I’ve never gotten yours.”

Her eyes darted wildly from side to side, clearly looking for an escape. No such opportunity presented itself. “Eloise,” she admitted, in a sullen tone.

“A good name. I’ve known some very nice Eloises in my day. Now, Eloise, I have a question for you, and you may want to think about it carefully, because it’s going to help determine what happens from here.” Alexander tilted his head slightly to the side, watching her for signs that she was getting ready to do something foolish. “Is Mr. Wilson really your uncle, or are you here under false pretenses? Well—falser pretenses. I think we both already know that he would never have approved you coming here to endanger his beloved plesiosaurs.”

“He’s my uncle,” said Eloise. “Ma used to talk all the time about Uncle Herbert’s monsters. So when Paul said he was looking for a way to turn things around for us, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity.”

Alexander frowned. “Living creatures are not an opportunity,” he said.

“You’re kidding, right?” asked Eloise. “Just one of these things could set us up for life. Hey, there’s a bargain for you—let us have one. Just one. Then we’ll go, and we’ll never come back here, I swear.”

Paul groaned. Alexander kicked him in the side of the head. The groaning stopped. “That’s an offer with a great many holes, my dear. What’s to stop you from telling someone else about the lake? And what about the plesiosaur you’re asking me to let you take away? What about her family? What about her life?”

“They’re monsters,” said Eloise. “They don’t have families.”

“Some people define monster a little different,” said Fran from behind her. The words were accompanied by the small click of a pistol’s safety being disengaged. Eloise froze. “I think that if we let you take one of these critters away from their home, we’d be monsters. Just like you.”

“Hello, Fran,” said Alexander. “Any trouble?”

“Not a bit.” Fran kept her gun aimed at Eloise’s head as she glanced at Paul. “What are we going to do with them?”

“I’m sure we’ll think of something,” said Alexander. Across the lake, a plesiosaur bellowed.

Eloise went pale.

The attic was empty, except for chests of old clothing and the usual assortment of broken furniture and forgotten bric-a-brac. Enid looked around, shook her head, and started back down the ladder. Maybe Jonathan would have better luck.

Jonathan had been able to find the basement door without trouble, only to discover—to his considerable dismay—that the light switch did nothing. He propped the door open with a can of beans from the pantry shelf before carefully taking the first steps down into the dark.

“Hello?” he called. “Mr. Wilson, are you here?”
Silence answered him.

“Mr. Wilson, it’s Jonathan Healy. I’m here to rescue you, but I need to know that you’re here before I can do that. It’s very dark in this basement. Please, if you can hear me, answer.”

There was a scuffling noise from the left corner. It could have been rats…but the grunts that followed were distinctly human. Jonathan holstered his pistol, descending the stairs as fast as he safely could.

“I’m coming, Mr. Wilson,” he said, hands outstretched into the darkness. He continued until his fingertips brushed the wall. Then he stopped, and felt his way along until he touched human hair.

Mr. Wilson had been bound and gagged and leaned up against the wall like a sack of potatoes. Jonathan knelt, peeling the gag away.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Herbert Wilson, who had been a prisoner in his own home ever since his niece appeared and asked if she could come inside, spat. Spat again. And finally, in a voice that was no less furious for being weak and crackling, demanded, “What took you so long?”

“I’m tired of holding these people here,” said Fran. “We could just shoot ’em. Save ourselves a lot of trouble later.”

“Murder should always be a last resort,” said Alexander. Paul groaned again; Alexander kicked him in the head again.

“You’re going to kill him!” shouted Eloise.

“Probably not,” said Alexander. “Young men have thick skulls.”

There was a rustle in the brush off to the side. Fran turned to look. Alexander, who was still covering Eloise with his pistol, didn’t, and so missed the moment when Enid and Jonathan emerged from the bushes, holding Herbert Wilson up between them.

“You’re in a lot of trouble, missy,” he said, glaring at Eloise.

“Uncle Herbert?” she whispered.

“You’re no kin of mine,” he said. The old man was thin and pale from his ordeal, but seemed otherwise none the worse for wear: a small blessing, Alexander thought. If Enid had found Herbert dead in the house up on the hill, Fran might have been allowed to commit murder after all. Eyes blazing, Herbert continued, “Your mama may yet be, but the two of you? Not a bit. You’re not welcome on my land. You’re thieves and liars.”

Eloise’s expression shut down, turning sullen once more. “If you’d just been willing to share…”

“I’ve called the sheriff already to tell him what you’ve done,” he said. “He’ll be here soon—and he grew up in these parts. He knows what lives in White Otter Lake, and he wants to protect it as much as I do. No one’s going to believe you about lake monsters where you’re going. But they’ll believe me about kidnapping and robbery.”
Eloise’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t. We’re family.”

“They’re my family,” said Herbert, gesturing toward the lake. “You’re just somebody who happens to be related to me.”

Silently, Eloise started to cry. Behind her, Fran smirked, but didn’t say anything.

It wasn’t necessary.

That night, after the sheriff had taken away Eloise and Paul—who was finally awake, and complaining of concussion—Fran and Jonathan stood on the lakeshore, watching elegant heads lift out of the water. Some had mouths full of fish. One was wearing an accidental crown of waterweeds. Jonathan slipped his arms around Fran’s waist, pulling her against him, and she allowed herself to be pulled without complaint.

“It really is beautiful here,” he said.

“It is,” she agreed. “What’s going to happen to them?”

“Well, I’ve already called Arturo, and he’s agreed bring a few of the Chicago gorgons up to meet Mr. Wilson. Maybe they can make arrangements to get Mr. Wilson some help with the house and with minding the lake.”

“That’s a good choice,” said Fran approvingly. “They need more space than they’ve got, and he needs more help than he has.”

“And Arturo gets an excuse to come and visit and eat more of Mother’s pie,” said Jonathan. “It’s perfect for everyone.”

“It really is,” agreed Fran, settling herself more firmly against him and watching the plesiosaurs move around the lake. “It really, really is.”

In the distance, a plesiosaur bellowed. Another answered back, and the world, strange and wonderful as it was, went on.