

Ann's Dragon

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"And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee."
—Friedrich Nietzsche, from *Beyond Good and Evil*

*Late Cretaceous Period, 70 million years ago
Western margin of the Cretaceous Western Interior Seaway, in what is now South Dakota*

Shafts of moonlight filtered down through the trees that grew ninety feet from the shoreline atop a gentle slope, the pale beams glistening off lush foliage and conifer needles. For hours the night, pungent with pine, hung lustrous and still. Then clouds rolled in from the north and slid over the moon, and a wind thick with the smell of rotting algae and fish slime whooshed up the slope from the warm, shallow sea. Boughs creaked, leaves rustled, cones rattled, and tiny mammals squeaked and skittered in the tossing undergrowth.

Unperturbed by the squall, the *Dryptosaurus* remained standing behind a magnolia tree peering out through the swaying branches, its gaze fixed on a herd of *Triceratops* that wallowed in the mud on the shore. These three-horned, rhinoceroslike dinosaurs, the adults weighing up to seven tons, sloshed and snorted in pleasure, oblivious of the wind and unaware of the predator.

Slowly, the clouds rolled away and the wind disappeared. Moonlight reflected off the broad, bony frill at the back of its head as a large adult left the herd and plodded up the slope toward the trees, trailed by a juvenile one-third its size.

The *Dryptosaurus*, a dinosaur resembling *Tyrannosaurus rex* but half as large, crouched on its haunches, then lowered its head and eyed the two through the bushes. Its forelimbs, proportionately longer than those of *T. rex*, tensed as the herbivores drew nearer. The first digit on each of its three-fingered hands bore a nine-inch sickle claw.

As its yellow eyes tracked them, within its brain, clusters of neurons misfired, the withered axons and dendrites long ago destroyed by microbes invading through a gash on its foot. Large species were not the prey of its kind unless hunted and brought down by packs. For years the damaged brain of the *Dryptosaurus* had failed to grasp this. On much of its body the grey-green, beaded scales were puckered with scars.

With a grunt, the adult *Triceratops* stopped twenty feet from where the waiting predator crouched and, with its nose horn, gouged the trunk of a fallen sycamore tree. Using its beak, it tore off a strip of bark.

Seconds later, the juvenile arrived and ambled to the crown. Muddy rump six feet from the deadly claws, it clipped off a mouthful of leaves.

Sinews tautening, the Dryptosaurus leaned forward, poisoning itself for attack. Every nerve quickened as its eyes focused on its prey. Triggered by the rich, musky smell of live flesh, gastric juices churned and gurgled in its belly. Saliva dripped from its dagger-toothed jaws.

The adult stopped chewing and raised its enormous grey head. Its nostrils quivered as it sniffed the air.

With a powerful thrust of its muscular thighs, the Dryptosaurus sprang from the trees and plunged its sickle claws into the juvenile's back. The adult let out a guttural cry and lowered its horns, pawing the earth. Half-blind in the moonlight, it did not charge.

As the talons grappled the scaly hide, goutts of blood spurted from the punctures. Bawling in pain, the juvenile tried to thrash its tail to disengage its attacker, but a heavy, clawed foot pinned it down. The Dryptosaurus, frenzied by its helpless prey's anguish, sank its talons deeper into the meaty grey back.

Abruptly, it lunged forward and clamped its jaws on the muscular tissue behind the frilled skull and buried its teeth. With a jerk, it ripped off a huge chunk of bone and flesh, then tilted its head back and swallowed it in one lizardlike gulp. The sickle claws now released their grip. The young dinosaur slumped to the ground.

Drooling crimson saliva blackened by moonlight, the Dryptosaurus bent over the carcass. With a swoop of its talons, it slashed open the belly and began to slurp down the entrails.

Now that it could distinguish the killer, the adult bellowed in fury. It charged head down and skewered the predator's flank and thigh with its three-foot brow horns. Blood gushed from the wounds. The Dryptosaurus roared and clawed at the air, frantically whipping its tail to pull itself free.

The Triceratops drove its horns deeper. The Dryptosaurus screeched, and wrenched its body, snapping its jaws. With one last mighty thrust, the Triceratops splintered the thigh bone and tore through the predator's gut. Frothing in rage, it thrashed its horns side to side in the wounds, and sprays of blood flew out from the gashes.

Its great body heaving, the Triceratops dipped its head and drew back, dislodging its horns. The Dryptosaurus crashed to the ground and writhed in agony. With its gore-smearred beak, the Triceratops nuzzled the juvenile's ravaged carcass and gave a long, mournful cry. Then it lumbered off to join the herd, which had moved on down the beach.

Wracked with pain, over and over the Dryptosaurus struggled to rise. Each attempt did nothing but move it farther down the slope and, finally, into the sea.

With the moon aglow on the water, surf washed in and pulled the bleeding reptile away from the shore. It battled its death, yet it did not know it was dying. Even as it sank to the sea floor its voraciousness grew, and it lurched at the fishes that swarmed round its wounds.

When the Dryptosaurus touched bottom, puffs of silt billowed upward, mixing with streaks of trailing blood. Seawater flooded its lungs. Soon, its body grew still.

In its brain, nerve impulses fired wildly, then ceased. The energy, indestructible, coalesced. A shred at a time, the dinosaur's flesh would be devoured by scavengers, but this essence, its soul, would remain.

Alive. Lusting for prey.

The Present

Raking a hand through her short copper hair, Ann Darveau shook the last drop of Sprite down her throat. She crushed the can, bent it in half, crushed it again, dropped it by her balled-up lunch sack, then eased her lanky body down beside the mosasaur she and Leonard "Froggy" Iverson had been excavating for the past three days.

As she knelt by the reptile's paddle bones, the black shale, sucking heat from the sun, burned her knees through her jeans, and the glare hurt her eyes. The air reeked of sweat and resin compound. "Wow, fun." She heaved a sigh.

Froggy, working on the other side of the mosasaur, looked for all the world like Willie Nelson minus the beard, with his ponytail, head bandanna, and weathered skin. He furrowed his brow. "Chill, kiddo. It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it." He gave her a wink.

"Aye, aye, oh green one. Here's me chillin'." Ann flashed him a cheesy grin.

She enjoyed being with Froggy, and his nickname tickled her. He'd told her he acquired it when he was eight and kept the slimy beasts as pets. The other diggers—four men and two women—clearly liked him, too.

Both fascinated by paleontology, she and Froggy had enrolled in this year's two-week field class. Black Hills State University gave one every summer, in mid-July. Ann, a single, thirty-four-year-old nurse aide, lived in Pierre. Froggy, a widower and retired high school math teacher, was sixty-three, and hailed from Chadron, Nebraska. The only non-college students in the group, they'd paired up as dig partners when the excavation began five days ago. Now they were friends.

Ann lifted her trowel from between two ribs where she'd placed it at lunchtime and gazed past the blurry forms of the other diggers, and out at the prairie. In the distance, red buttes dotted with pine jutted from a scorched plain dotted with cattle. As far as Ann knew, in southwestern South Dakota, only here at the K-2 site were shales of the Cretaceous inland sea exposed over so large an area. The site encompassed several acres.

She dried her brow on her forearm and looked around her, at the shale. Gran—her Lakota grandmother, her father's mother—probably would have sensed a special energy here, for oddly, even Ann herself did. Gran might have called the site *makha wakan*, sacred ground. Her totem was the owl, among whose powers, whose gifts, were insight and psychic vision.

When Ann was twelve, Gran helped her select a totem of her own. Ann decided on the heron, whose powers were determination and self-reliance. She still cherished the small wooden heron Gran had carved for her to keep the spirit close. She kept the carving near her always, in memory of Gran, and to absorb the essence of the totem. Today the carving was in her shirt pocket.

Ann kept Gran's owl carving, too, tucked away at home. Her grandfather had given her the carving when Gran died a year ago. Instead of bringing solace, the wooden owl had made Ann feel uneasy, and night after night, she'd dreamed the same vivid dream. Its meaning eluded her.

In the dream, Ann was an owl, flying over moonlit water. She, the owl, yearned to peer into its depths, and knew she could, if she flew closer. She swooped down—and was suddenly struck with terror, sensing that something evil lurked there that would devour her if she didn't rise. She flapped her wings, fighting to ascend, but each wingbeat brought her nearer the water. Always, Ann woke in a cold sweat, trembling.

She'd finally put the owl carving in a drawer, out of sight. The dream hadn't returned. Until last night.

Ann pushed the dream from her mind and, with the trowel tip, pried a toast-sized slab of matrix from the mosasaur's shoulder blade and flipped the slab over onto her palm. A few small clam shells and what appeared to be a chunk of coral were embedded in the shale. She put the slab in a collection bag and pried off another slab, several times larger than the first. Checking it for fossils, she saw only a faint, curved depression. She laid the slab aside.

She turned again to the shoulder blade. There, atop the exposed layer of matrix, was what looked like an enormous talon. She caught in her breath.

"What's wrong?" Froggy clambered to his feet. He followed Ann's gaze, and bent over with his hands on his knees and peered at it. "Will you look at that! What—"

"It's some kind of claw." Ann stared at it, transfixed. Suddenly, inexplicably, she felt depressed, as if a shadow had crept over her soul. As instantly as it had appeared, the feeling vanished.

Froggy strode around the mosasaur and squatted beside her. He extended his arm and held it over the talon. "At the base it's as thick as my elbow, and if it were straight, it would be almost as long as my forearm! And this is only the bone. If the sheath had survived, the thing would be even bigger!"

Ann moved her face closer to it. "I wonder what it belonged to. Mosasaurs didn't have claws, and as far as I know, neither did any other Cretaceous sea animal." She looked at Froggy. "I'll bet it came from a dinosaur."

"Here be dragons? Here in the crunchy black sea?"

Ann snickered. "Dragons? Right."

"Dragons, dinosaurs. What's in a name? A scaly critter by either name would smell sweet. Well ... maybe not."

She gave him a playful punch on the arm. "Bravo, Shakespeare. Speaking of smell, we'd better put some resin on it. See all those hairline cracks? It's as fragile as eggshells." She wrinkled her nose. "Want to do the honor?"

"Annie, don't you think Professor Baird should see it first?"

"After breakfast I saw him leave in the Jeep. I heard one of the kids—I think it was Kyle—say he went to the Badlands site. Hard telling when he'll be back, so should we go ahead and give it some glue?"

Froggy lifted an eyebrow. "Help yourself. It's your baby, kiddo."

Ann picked up her plastic bottle of resin compound and fixed her eyes on the claw. "The dino must have died on the beach and washed out to sea." She tipped the bottle and squeezed a few drops onto the base. "The whole skeleton might be buried here somewhere." She squeezed the bottle harder, and a gush of preservative splattered on the bone and dribbled down the sides.

Still squeezing the bottle, she worked her way to the tip. "Or maybe it didn't die on the beach and wash out to sea. Maybe it was chasing something through the water and got stuck in the mud." After she doused the tip, she started back toward the base.

"Whoa!" Froggy reached over and grasped her wrist. "You're overdoing it! It'll turn to mush!"

Bleary-eyed from the fumes, she squinted up at him. "But I want to make sure—"

"Uh-oh." He released his grip on her wrist. "We have a problem."

Trailing his gaze, Ann looked down. "Oh, no!"

The tip was collapsing, and on the rest of the claw, the cracks were widening. Fragments of bone had broken loose and were spreading in a sticky tide over the matrix.

"What now?" Ann said, her voice cracking. She set the bottle down.

Froggy bit his lip. "I don't know, kiddo."

"Can't I do *anything* without going overboard?" She rolled her eyes. "Of course I can't. Not me."

Froggy picked up Ann's mangled Sprite can, tossed it in his hand a couple of times, then laid it back beside her wadded lunch sack. "I've noticed."

"I guess I'm compulsive."

He didn't respond.

A lump in her throat, Ann stared at the claw. "Maybe I can fix it."

"It's worth a try," he said. "I'll help."

"Both of us working on it would be pretty cramped. Anyway, it's my fault it's falling apart like a soggy cracker. Thanks, though."

Froggy nodded. "Whistle if you need a hand." He gave her shoulder a pat, then stood up and walked back to the other side of the mosasaur.

Ann hunched over the claw bone. With the smallest blade on her jack knife, she nudged into place the fragments that had slid from the base. Then, a piece at a time, she began to rebuild the tip.

From the corner of her right eye, she saw a sudden, dark flicker of movement. She turned her head toward it. Nothing was there, nothing but clear heat waves and lifeless black shale. She looked back at the claw.

It stirred.

She blinked the sweat from her eyes and gaped at it. "Froggy, take a look at this!"

"What's up?"

"The claw wiggled—yes, *wiggled*—and now the cracks are closed! They're small, like before!"

He walked around the mosasaur and leaned over her shoulder. "The claw's soaking wet, Annie. It must have shifted."

"Shifted *back together*?"

He scratched at his chin. "Yeah ... that is kind of strange."

"Do you know what else?" Ann pointed to the claw tip. "I didn't put all those slivers in place. I moved just a few, but look at it now. The tip's almost complete." She hoisted herself up. "This is weird. I'm taking a break."

Froggy picked up their water jug, and together he and Ann walked to a dirt overhang at the edge of the site and sat down in the shade.

"Feel okay?" Froggy asked, pouring water into the lid. "You look pale under that sunburn." He handed the lid to Ann.

"Thanks." She took a swallow and wiped her mouth on her wrist. "I feel all right, but I must have sniffed too much glue. I don't remember getting that far with the claw tip."

"Do you think you might have worked on the cracks too, and forgotten?"

Ann shrugged. "Maybe. But there's one thing I'm sure of. It moved. The claw moved."

Froggy cupped a hand under the jug tap and turned it on. "As I said before, kiddo, the claw was sopped. It shifted." He brought his hand to his mouth and gulped the water down. "Anyway, that's my theory." He yawned, folded his arms, then leaned against the bank and closed his eyes.

For the next twenty minutes Ann gazed at the diggers bent over their mosasaurs, fish, and flightless sea birds, and pondered the claw. Heat rose from the shale in translucent ripples.

A spot just to the right of where she'd been working caught her eye. There the ripples looked darker. They began to swirl, gradually coalescing into a writhing grey mass. Moments later, the mass grew translucent and turned into ripples again.

What was that? Ann thought, and brushed aside a strange urge to flee.

Froggy stretched. "Well, I suppose we'd better head back."

Ann downed her water, then gave him the lid and stood up. "Do you know what bothers me?"

"Nope. What bothers you?"

"Not knowing if the rest of the skeleton's there. I can't help it. I'm dying to know what owned the claw."

"Same here," Froggy said, putting the lid on the jug, "but I doubt the Prof would like it if we started pawing around." He stood up too, and they crunched their way back to the mosasaur.

A half hour later, Ann finished the claw tip. "Whew." She sat up and rubbed her eyes. "There. Every crumb back in place."

"Great!" Froggy said. "Let me drip some glue on these vertebrae, and I'll sneak a peek at your object d'art."

Frowning, she pulled herself to her feet. "You know, I'll bet it's a foot claw from a T. rex. Or it could be a sickle talon from a *Deinonychus*. But wait. Maybe our claw's too big and this layer too recent for a *Deinonychus*. I'll stay with T. rex." She brushed off her knees. "Okay, your turn. What do you think?"

"What do I think? I think you're obsessing, Annie."

Ann scuffed at the shale. "I've been known to do that."

"When I'm through here, what say we knock off?" Froggy said. "It's almost four. I see the others took off for camp."

"Sounds good." Ann squatted and gathered her tools—rock pick, brushes, trowel—and put them into a burlap sack. The sack, along with others, was later to be cut into strips, soaked in plaster, and placed on the

mosasaur to secure it for removal.

She felt eyes on her back. Someone was watching her—she sensed it. She glanced over her shoulder. No one was there. She stood and looked around.

Then she saw it—the dark mass she'd seen from the overhang. Twice her height, swirling like smoke, it hovered over the shale five yards away. As the mass gathered form, it inched closer. Ann took a step back.

It had eyes, or what she perceived to be eyes. Formed from gaps in the haze, they were mere slits of sky, but she felt them upon her.

A reptilian head was creating itself in the vapor. Drifting out of the churning swirls of the body, limbs began to take shape. On each straggly manus was a wisp transforming into a sickle-shaped claw.

Now fully formed, the spectre crouched down and leaned forward, as if ready to pounce.

Ann tried to run. Her legs wouldn't budge.

Its jaws floated open, revealing huge scimitar teeth. It rolled its head skyward and let out an ear-ripping shriek, then lunged at her. It billowed over her, enveloped her. A wisp at a time, the beast disappeared into her body. She opened her mouth to cry out...

...and found herself standing near the edge of a woods, looking out at a white-capped sea. It was night, as dark as sin. A rank wind blew...

The sea now lay calm. The air was still and scented with pine, and moonlight fell on the branches. She felt her hind claws grip the earth as she crouched and watched two forms draw near from the shore...

The taste of blood was thick on her tongue. Again and again she sank her fangs into the carcass. Her sickle claws gleamed with moon-darkened gore...

Ann's head jerked back. She blinked, then yelped and ran stumbling over the shale.

Froggy caught up with her, grabbed her shoulders, and turned her around. "Annie! What happened?"

"It went into me! And I saw—" Gasping for breath, she slumped to her knees.

"What did? What went into you?"

She buried her face in her trembling hands. "Didn't you—didn't you—see it?"

"See what, Annie? See what?"

She looked up at him. "The dinosaur! Froggy, it's inside me! The one that owned the claw!"

He squatted beside her. "Kiddo, you're not making sense."

Ann took a few deep breaths, and her trembling subsided. "It was there." She pointed to where she'd seen the mass. "I felt something watching me. Then I saw a haze, and it turned into what looked like a tyrannosaurus."

She thrust up her hands and curled the first fingers. "But it had big sickle claws. They looked like our claw. I don't know what kind of dino it was. Anyway, it gave this hideous screech, and then it flowed over me, went into me. That's when I had them. Flashes. Of its memories—its life. I know that's what they were. I saw them through its eyes." She described the images.

Froggy stood up and helped her to her feet.

"You don't believe me," she said, clutching her arms.

"Given the fumes, the heat, and that you've been gung ho about the claw ever since you found it, I understand why you thought you saw the dino, and why you had the visions." Froggy rubbed the back of his neck. "Possessed you? Is that what you think it's done?"

"That's what it's doing. I know it."

"Let's talk about it on the way to camp. Feel okay to walk?"

"I guess so."

They headed across the half mile of sagebrush that lay between the site and the thistle-choked camp.

Ann's arms swung out of time with her legs. Her whole body felt wrong.

Froggy said, "About the claw—it might be a good idea not to mention it till the Prof gets back. It's up to you, but I'm afraid the kids would talk it up, and you'd dwell on it even more."

"You're scared I'd tell what happened and they'd think I was crazy, right?"

With a sheepish half-grin, he reached over and ruffled her hair. "Okay, yeah. But the big reason's this: If you don't let the claw go, it'll be a bearcat sorting things out. At least that's my take on it."

"What if I'm not imagining it?" Ann said.

"You mean what if the thing's really in you?"

Ann nodded.

"I don't buy it," Froggy said. "But let's say I'm wrong. Your obsessing over the claw could have opened the door to the dino's soul, or whatever it is. To get rid of it, I'd say the same thing goes—don't think about it. Suffocate it."

"Don't think about it? Easier said than done."

For a time, they walked in silence. Then Ann said, "Do you remember when I told you about my grandmother's totem and the dream?"

"Sure I do. Why?"

"The dream came back last night. I wonder if the dream was, and always has been, a sign, an omen. Maybe the owl was warning me that my dwelling on things would someday get me into trouble—this trouble. What if the water in the dream symbolized the ancient sea that's now the site? And what if the thing the owl sensed lurking there, the evil thing, was the dino's soul?"

"Sometimes a dream's just a dream," Froggy said. "Besides, the owl was your grandmother's totem. Yours is some other kind of bird, you said."

"The heron. But who knows, my grandmother's spirit may have sent the owl to me. It would explain why I'm now open to the supernatural. One of the owl's gifts is psychic vision."

"Kiddo, let's back up a minute. Isn't a soul supposed to have a motive for sticking around? You know, like unfinished business or revenge? What motive could your dinosaur possibly have?" He slapped his arm. "Darned gnats."

"It might not have a motive," Ann said. "Maybe it refused to accept it was dead, or didn't know it was, and its ghost ended up locked in an old behavior pattern, like a human ghost that walks the same hallway night after night. I don't know why its soul stayed around, Froggy. All I know is it did, and now it's inside me."

When, bug-bitten and parched, they finally trudged into camp, the others were grouped around the crew van. Petite blond Heidi put her hands on her hips and grinned. "It's about time, you guys. Get your stuff from your tents and plunk your butts in the clod rod. Let's hit those showers."

Ann took a can of Sprite from the cooler, grabbed her duffel, and climbed into the first back seat with brown-pigtailed Bonnie, and Tim, a husky redhead. Behind them sat Kyle, Luis, and Ray. All three wore backwards baseball caps. The likeness stopped there. Kyle was a gangly towhead, Luis a wiry Latino, and Ray, though younger than the star, reminded Ann of David Letterman. Froggy sat in the front with Heidi, chauffeur of the day.

In a puff of dust, the van rattled off for the pay showers at Kozy Kamp, eleven miles away. When the tires shimmy-bumped over the cowguard and rolled onto the clodless highway, Ann leaned back her head, shut her eyes, and with all her resolve, focused on the Eagles song playing on the radio. She usually liked "Desperado." Now it sounded like noise.

Ann sighed. The water felt heavenly splashing down on her, and the soap's minty scent pleased her nose. She scrubbed from head to toe with her bath net, then, loving the feel of the bubbles, smeared the suds

around with her hands. Gradually, the tension ebbed from her body. Humming softly, determined not to think of the ghost, she rinsed until the water turned cold, then shut off the spigot and reached for her towel.

Pain stabbed through her side and thigh, excruciating, unbearable. Clutching herself, she doubled over and fell to her knees. Another jolt tore through her, and another. Her eyes rolled back, and she crumpled to the wood slat floor.

Blood streamed from her wounds as her scaly body convulsed in the dirt. She thrashed and strained, fighting to stand...

Little by little, her huge, tortured form slid down to the sea. Waves engulfed her, pulled her out to the deep. She felt herself sinking...

Coughing and sputtering, Ann scrambled to her feet. When the spasms stopped, she looked down at her side, her thigh. The pain was gone; her flesh was unscathed. As calmly as she could, she dried herself, rubbed on deodorant, and dressed. Suffocate it? Not a chance. The claw—she would smash it. If that didn't expel the ghost ... well ... she had a feeling nothing would.

Combing her hair, she left the shower house. Froggy was waiting for her outside the men's door, with his wet towel rolled under his arm. "Been worried. How's it going?"

Ann slipped her comb into her duffel and put on a happy face. "Never better." They walked to the van, climbed into their seats, and the group set off for camp.

Blowflies, glinting metallic green in the late day sun, circled like buzzards over the sizzling meat. Using tongs, Ann put the burgers on a paper plate, then with a spatula, slid fresh patties onto the grill.

"Mmm," Froggy said, forking the burgers into sliced, buttered buns. He gave her a grin. "They smell downright edible."

"Especially the raw ones." Ann winked, but she meant it.

"Seriously, the dino's gone, right?"

"No problem."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

For a moment Froggy looked in her eyes. Then, without a word, he sandwiched the rest of the burgers and carried the plate to the metal folding table, where the others stood opening chip bags and setting out condiments.

After supper Ann cleaned the grill and helped gather clutter. When the tasks were done, light was dwindling and a full moon was on the rise. Amid yawns, half the crew shuffled off to their tents. Ann was wide awake, fidgety. She cleaned the grill again, jogged a few awkward laps around the campsite, then finally plopped on the ground by Froggy and, gritting her teeth, watched Luis and Bonnie twang their guitars.

The moon hung high above camp. Darkness had fallen. Ann's heart pummeled her throat as she lay in her tent on her open bedroll, her hands clenched at her sides. In the black she saw nothing, but her nose prickled with the skunk-stink of thistles, and her ears were alive with the sawing of crickets and the faraway yipping of coyotes.

Sure the others would at last be asleep, she crawled to the entrance. Sweat beading on her face, she fumbled and fumbled with the tent flap, unable to recall how to lift it. Finally, near panic, she pushed her head through the flap, and with a surge of relief, crept out into the night.

She rose and slipped quietly away. When she reached the shale, she stopped and drew a deep breath. Then she stole across the ancient black sea.

Moonbeams danced on the mosasaur. Stooping over, Ann reached into the burlap sack and pulled out her trowel. Carefully, she pried the layer of matrix loose in which the claw was embedded. She set the trowel down, then carried the slab a few yards away, laid it on the shale, and returned to get her rock pick.

With the handle gripped in both hands, Ann knelt by the claw. Looking down at it, she trembled at its awesome size, its deadly arc; at its gleam, savage and wondrous under the moon. Even lined with glue-sealed cracks, the fossil was chilling ... and beautiful. So beautiful.

Her chin quivered as she raised the pick. She squeezed her eyes shut, and with all her strength, thrust her arms down. When the point struck, shards of bone and shale flew in every direction, hitting the ground in a shower of clinks. Sobbing, she swung the pick over and over, until the claw was mashed into powder.

Ann let the pick drop, and from the depths of her soul came a wild, piercing shriek. She had the appalling sensation that her skin was bursting; that the thing, screeching and clawing, was being sucked out of her. She frantically grasped at herself, then hunched over and gripped her head in her arms. *Make it stop!*

The shriek grew louder, reverberating through her—and abruptly ceased. Her spine arched back. A great shudder spasmed her body. With a final, bone-stunning jolt, it was over. Shoulders heaving, she laughed and cried in her hands. She was free!

A minute later, as she stood up, she heard the crackle of footsteps behind her. She whirled around. "Froggy!"

Moonlight played on his loose, flowing hair as he walked up to her.

Ann wiped her eyes with her hands. "How'd you know I was here?"

"I didn't feel right about some things you said. Or maybe it was how you said them. I don't know, maybe it was what you didn't say, and how you acted. I wanted to talk, but you weren't in your tent. I searched for you high and low. When I finally spotted you walking across the site, I followed you."

Scowling, he leaned around her and looked down at the pulverized bone. "Is that the claw?"

"I had to do it, Froggy. There was no other way."

He bowed his head, and for a time didn't speak. Then, eyes burning, he looked up and said, "Well, are you happy? Is the big bad bogeysaur gone?"

"Yes."

"Then I guess the party's over. Unless you're bent on finding the rest of the dino and smashing it, too."

Doing that hadn't occurred to Ann. Sure, Froggy was being sarcastic, but what he'd said made sense. If she didn't destroy the bones, the ghost might get inside her again.

She turned and reached down for her rock pick. Carrying it, she brushed past him. She walked a couple of yards, dropped to her knees, and began to hack at the shale.

"No!" Froggy stepped up behind her and grasped the handle.

She jerked it away and glowered up at him from over her shoulder. "This is where I saw the ghost, where it went into me. I know the rest of the dino's here. Right here, on this very spot. Yes, Froggy, I'm going to dig it up and smash it, so that—"

"Give me the pick!" He reached for it.

Ann swung the pick at the ground as hard as she could. Puffing, she threw it down, and with her hands, wrenched up the loosened pieces of shale and flung them aside.

"Stop!" Froggy lunged at her.

The ground began to shake. With a groan, the earth heaved up. Chunks of shale broke loose, clattering as they tumbled away. Ann jumped to her feet. Arms flailing, she staggered backward and fell, knocking Froggy down.

The ground stilled.

Ann rolled to her hands and knees. "Sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"Forget it! I'm okay." Froggy sat up and rubbed his arm. Though visibly shaken, his eyes still burned; he didn't look at Ann. "That was some tremor. You all right?"

"Uh-huh, fine." Ann climbed to her feet and stared at the mass of broken shale. She walked toward it.

"Don't!" Froggy grabbed her pantleg. "What if there's a rift?"

With a jerk of her leg, she broke his grip, and kept walking. "I have to see what's there."

She knelt in the mass and, swiping her hand and forearm over the surface, removed a thin layer of shattered sediment.

And there it was—the creature's braincase. She brushed away more sediment and freed the rest of the skull.

The shale eyes gaped blackly at the twinkling sky, the sockets crumbling, becoming dust. Compressed by rock for eons, the cranium was nearly flat. The skull was webbed with fractures, and here and there the bone was crushed.

She heard the gritting of Froggy's footsteps as he walked quickly up behind her.

He hunkered down beside her. His eyes widened. "Unreal! Absolutely stunning!" Gently, he plucked a clam shell from between two of the fossil's broken teeth. "I won't let you hurt it. I hope you know that."

"Don't worry. I haven't the heart to. I know it. I almost couldn't smash the claw. I'll come up with another way to—"

The skull creaked.

"It's mending!" Ann said. "The cracks are growing shut!"

The ground rumbled. Beneath their feet, the shale splintered. Without hesitation, they sprang up and ran. A few yards from the sagebrush Ann tripped. She tried to catch herself but toppled over, sprawling on her stomach.

"Come on, Annie!"

She felt Froggy grip her armpits, then release them.

Groaning, she pulled herself up. Froggy, mouth agape, stood looking back across the moonlit site. She followed his stare—and froze. Thirty yards away, plodding toward them, bones glinting, shedding chunks of shale with every step, was the creature.

Her breath stuck in her throat.

Its silhouette said big bipedal carnosaur. Part of the skeleton was hidden in shale; the visible bones looked whole. As it trudged toward them it staggered, and Ann noticed that its spine was crooked, that some of the vertebrae were encrusted and out of alignment, bridged together by sediment. Atop the spine bobbed the razor-fanged skull. Below the skull, slightly off-kilter, clacked the large lower jaw.

Hunks of shale clung to the pelvis and ribs. As the creature clomped closer, she saw what looked like the long-beaked, crushed skull of a *Hesperornis* sticking out of the jagged rock flesh, and jumbles of fish bones and shells. The creature's skeletal legs and small forelimbs were clean.

Only the left hand bore a sickle-shaped claw.

Ann grabbed Froggy's arm. She could feel him shaking. "It knows we're here!" she said. "It's after us! We have to change direction, or we'll lead it right to camp!"

Froggy didn't answer.

"No, wait!" Ann contradicted herself, thinking furiously. "What if it's, like, zombie-walking, and keeps coming this way anyhow? Let's not chance it. You high-tail it out of here, get the kids, and go! I'll try to head it off, buy you time."

Again, Froggy didn't answer. Eyes glazed, he stared straight ahead.

"Please, Froggy! Do it!" Ann shook his arm.

He didn't blink, didn't move.

The creature was ten yards away. Heart pounding, Ann charged toward it.. The creature stopped abrupt-

ly and, craning its skeletal neck, lowered its skull.

A few steps away from its sharp, snapping teeth, Ann swerved and took off on a sprint along the site's perimeter, waving her arms wildly to hold its attention. Looking back, she saw it lurch toward her. Good! Froggy was safe!

She ran several yards and looked back again. She gasped. It was changing. The creature was changing.

Raw sinew glistened on its forelimbs and haunches. Shale sloughed from its ribs, and behind them were masses that she knew must be lungs and a pulsating heart. Its head was still bone, but from the sockets glowed eyes. *My God!* she thought. *What have I done?*

The missing claw had to be the same claw she smashed. What if she smashed the skull, or one of the shinbones? Would it bring the thing down?

Only one way to find out.

The creature's footsteps crashing behind her, Ann veered off and started back across the moon-dappled site. The creature turned too; she heard the crunch of its feet on the shale. Growing louder.

Her lungs ached. Her legs felt as if they were turning to rubber. Though ready to drop, she drove herself onward, willed her legs to move faster. The pick. She had to get it before the creature was fully fleshed out.

Her feet whacked the ground. *Almost there.*

She snatched up the pick and kept going. With a blast of adrenaline, she leaped over the mosasaur skeleton. She ran thirty feet, then stopped. Swung around.

The dinosaur bloomed from the darkness. Eyes glowing like embers, it bounded toward her, jaws and torso thrust forward, tail held straight out behind. Only scattered spots on its shins showed bone.

Ann gripped the pick tight and rushed at the beast. A few feet from the slobbering jaws she cut to her left. With a vigorous swing of her arm, she plunged the pick deep into a bony patch below the dino's right knee. She let go of the handle, and without looking back, raced for the mosasaur.

She dove over the skeleton. For a handful of seconds she lay on her stomach, trying to catch her breath. Gravel bit the side of her face. Her palms burned, felt sticky.

Slowly, she raised her head and looked over the top of the fossil. The dinosaur was still standing! Not only standing, but moving! It loped back and forth sniffing the shale, near the place where she'd struck it. The pick lay on the ground; the shin she'd struck was intact. Both shins were pebbled with shiny raised scales.

Ann saw gaping wounds on its left flank and thigh. Recalling her pain in the shower, she gave a start, and her shoulder bumped the skeleton. Froggy's trowel slid from the backbone and clanked to the ground.

The dinosaur stopped, and with a low, rumbling growl, turned in her direction. She saw the muscles on its forelimbs twitch, the sickle claw flex. Its hooded eyes appeared to look right at her.

She choked back a gasp. Didn't move.

Jaws parted, teeth glistening, it cocked its big, beaded head. Then, with a snap of its tail, it turned on its haunches and clomped away.

Ann gave a sigh of relief. Her muscles felt limp; her body ached. She lay back down.

A familiar shape caught her eye. Large and curved, it gleamed at her from a few yards away. The claw? It couldn't be! She belly-scooted over to it. It was! And it was all in one piece! Why hadn't it attached to the creature? Was it too far from the skeleton to stick itself on?

No cracks. No glue. And now hard keratin sheathed the bone. She ran her hands over the surface—and quickly pulled them away. The places she touched were crumbling! She turned her hands over, and it dawned on her why. Her palms were bleeding.

Winching in pain, she brushed them over every inch of the claw. Before her eyes, it turned to dust; in the distance, the dinosaur yowled. Ann stood up and walked toward the sound.

She found the dinosaur at the far end of the site, near where the shale met the plain. Meaty thighs quivering with each thudding step, it was making its way toward the sagebrush. Every few yards, it thrust its snout skyward and let out an agonized shriek. Ann saw the reason. Near the center of its spine, several vertebrae

poked through. No ragged tissue; the flesh was just gone. That cinched it—her blood was the key.

She was the dino's connection to Now.

Her face fell in her blood-crusted hands, and she cried. For its pain. For herself. Her legs felt weak, but she managed to pick up her pace.

From somewhere in the distance came a faint, muffled shout. Tracing the sound, Ann looked behind her and saw a dim figure approaching. *No, Froggy! she thought. Stay back!*

Running, she ducked under the swaying tail and started around the body. The dinosaur stopped. On its flank, the scales rippled. Tightened. Then its massive head dipped, swung around.

She felt an abrupt, awful pain, and she knew that the sickle claw was slashing her bowels. She saw the dino's jaws close on her head, smelled its wet, rancid mouth. Felt its teeth pierce her neck. Heard a crunch.

The Dryptosaurus placed a heavy, clawed foot on the twitching legs of its prey. With an upward jerk of its head, it tore off the skull. It crushed it in its jaws and swallowed it. Then it bent over to dig its fangs into the entrails.

Suddenly, as if jolted by lightning, its gore-splattered torso snapped erect. With a crack, it wrenched forward, and the Dryptosaurus crashed to the ground. Dark spittle frothed from its mouth. Its gullet spasmed; its gut disgorged. Consumed by pain, the Dryptosaurus thrashed, twisted, bit at itself.

On its writhing body, the ancient wounds began to spout blood. Its healthy skin shriveled, then from the flesh and vanished. Its heart burst inward. The blood stopped gushing, disappeared; and the wounds dissolved into nothing. Soon, all its flesh and viscera were gone.

As its teeth and bones shattered and every claw fell to dust, the air trembled. The sky turned pitch black.

Then it was over. The night grew still. Moonlight once again washed over the shale; and stars, and light from stars long gone, gleamed down.

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