

MAJOR LEAGUE TRICERATOPS

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IN THE GALLERY

In the dim corridor, the spaces hushed by fog, the dim and dazzling lights of the exposed diorama playing, the paleontologist stared at the great, shrouded skeletons revolving slowly into the light, the huge and vaulting figures of *Struthiomimus* and *Triceratops* and that flaming tower, the *Tyrannosaurus*, emerging into the strobe. Look at those sons of bitches, the paleontologist said. He was old as new scientists go, a late career change had plummeted him into university at forty, out at fifty with a deep and final understanding of mortality. Ever see anything like that? The woman whose hand he was holding shrugged and shook her head. She had learned the virtues of silence with this man early on. He would not listen.

They were killers, the paleontologist said. One kick, you were gone. But now *they* are gone. What do you think of that?

I don't think, the woman said.

This was close to the truth, near enough to pass, anyway. The tyrannosaur's enormous kneebone, the arch of that bone, loomed before them and she looked up, the line of her gaze passing almost indifferently, casually, over the small skull, half-concealed behind the foot of the larger *Triceratops*. The skull was the size of a man's and flayed to an ardent white.

Take *that* one on the ranch, the paleontologist said. He scratched his nose. Ride 'em cowboy, he said. Take that one down the loop of Montana, what do you say?

I don't say anything, the woman said. You have taught me the crest of silence. She squeezed his hand, curled a finger in his palm. Not even a haiku, she said. Not even five by seven by five.

The paleontologist turned, stared at her with full interest, his gaze caught by the fine cheekbones, the intensity of her gaze, something of the prehistoria herself, he thought, in this odd and twisted light. Her father had been Japanese, the mother pure *Norteamericana*, and the Orient had seemed buried in her face until this angle, this moment, now in the spattered light cast by the dinosaur, in the clutch of her hand she seemed, suddenly, to bear all of the wound and stain of her heritage. Five by seven by five, the paleontologist said. *In the light the bird/Caught in Cretaceous flight as the bone talks to us*. What do you think of that?

I think it is very decadent, she said. *De-ca-dent*, like the time travelers going back to shoot them on their ranches, that is what I think.

But not touching?

It is touching, she said. Everything is touching in the gallery at noon in the dark. She pointed at the small, shattered ridges of teeth. It may talk to you, she said. It doesn't talk to me.

I have nothing to do with the ranches, he said. It is unfair of you to discuss the ranches. I am a scientist.

Yes, she said, you are very scientific. She made him feel the pressure then, putting her knee against his. *De-ca-dent*, she said again. A great horned thing charging toward us in the night, yes.

You are strange, Maria, the paleontologist said. I do not understand you.

You are the bone, she said. You are the bone which talks to us. Take me home and show me the bone.

He turned away from her but his other hand was reaching, clutching for her waist. She felt the icy, encircling touch. In old Montana, he said. They must have had a time.

They always had a time. Time was nothing for them. They cruised through the dirt like boats. Take me out of here, she said. I have heard enough of Montana and the ranches and time. I don't want to look at the dead things anymore. Now, she said, or not at all.

Am I too *de-ca-dent* for you, Maria? Is that what you are telling me?

She looked at the spaces up and down, the crucifixes of bone assembled now in small wedges up and down the spines of the reconstructed tyrannosaur. I don't know, she said. Am I supposed to?

Back then, back here, he said. His grasp tightened and they were moving then toward the door, he leading, she guiding, the two of them reaching but at the exit they stood for a while, first one then the other pointing at the creatures looming before them. When they were gone at last, the fog, cleared slightly by their respiration, closed on the emptiness and obscured what neither had seen: the small, round skull, shiny and neat as an ornament, lying at the reconstructed rear left foot of the tyrannosaur, the eye hollows glinting in the received light.

In the light my bird, the paleontologist cried later. But that had nothing to do with the gallery, he insisted. Nothing to do with it at all. Her hands on his head were fire.

THE ROBLES TRANSCRIPTS

I am going to keep notes on this. Testimony is going to be kept. There will be some records of the disaster, if disaster it will be. Going back to torment *Tyrannosaurus*, shoot *Triceratops*, explore the flora of the Cretaceous and sight the huge, dying beasts. We promised Dix a kill and a kill it is going to be, one saved from paradox by this world. It will change nothing. (Perhaps it will change everything. But we wouldn't know, would we?) Consider the *Triceratops* .

Consider that beast. Weight up to five and a quarter tons, more than four thousand kilos, then. Thirty to thirty-five feet in length full grown, flourished or at least lurked in this latest part of the Cretaceous (Latin derivative, *chalk*). One of the largest and meanest of the horned dinosaurs, not like scuttling *Struthiomimus* or businesslike tyrannosaur but rather this is an animal with its own program. Put it down, give it to Dix tomorrow, the number of the beast. With photographs. Three sharp, pointed horns on that bland, boxy rhinoceros face, the horns measuring more than three feet. The mottled cores encircled by a series of occipital bones. Am I doing this right? Ten species, more or less, slightly varied.

Those bony horn cores survive into our era in the form of rhinoceroses and some of the great horned birds. The Great Montana Dude Ranch. Point the launcher, Dix, and let it fly, *unseat the beast*, make his bones run like water. Perhaps overdramatizing but then again, melodrama is the last connection the servant class can attempt toward a sense of their consequence. I think I just made that up now.

It is cold here, the small arc of light, the pungent blasts of heater do not really help, do not conceal the

cold. Dix, the winner of the contest, sleeps quietly, gathering himself against his great opportunity. I gather myself *too*. Gather myself in this prehistoric plunge toward—toward what? Reconception and redevelopment to be sure and all the revisions of time. In latter years the *Triceratops* shot by Dix will decompose along with all this era, the living too, steam slowly into the mists. None of it will remain but that small testimony I can leave or that at least I think is the insistence which drives me forward, drives me back, takes me through this busy and circumstantial time.

Dix, poised on the rim of the impossible, leveling the stick of fire and the great beast, confused, stumbling in the chalk and doom.

MORNING LIGHT

The notes lacked away, his schedule set, insistent sleep craved, Robles stumbled toward awareness quickly, rising through the flickering levels of illumination, reaching toward the weight of sixty-seven million crushing years and found himself lying tangled on the earth, the ropes of the tent a geometry of madness spattering shadows. Cry of prehistoric birds in the distance, the strange, dry whooping of a beast, then. He reared to a seated position, arched away from the sleeping Muffy, fully clothed yes as he had prepared but with the feeling that he had nonetheless fallen helplessly behind, lost all grip and sense of what he had come to do, knew only the falling sickness. But peering through the tent he could see that the little camp was silent, the other tents undisturbed, Dix's tent falling in even folds, this dense time still wrapped heavily around the sleepers. His terror must have come from dreams, not circumstance, some atavism of displacement, of having been taken by time to this utter and dismaying disconnection.

Back in the tent he struggled to move from dreams of wounded reptiles and death then, suppressed the dream sounds of carnage to come, breathed slowly in the clammy silence, his breath curling before him. Muffy sighed, a pretty woman, a pretty distracted woman, no courtesan but a friend, a part of the tour, yes, but more than that to him now, she insisted, and he looked at her momentarily without desire, without any intimation of need, remembering the places his hands had found in that scurrying time earlier when he had been driven from a need he could no more articulate than he could decipher those dim whoops. Let her sleep, yes, he thought, there was enough and a different aspect of time to come.

Standing there, back to the embankment, he could see the reflection of the floodlights spilling through the protected zone, framing the sleeping Muffy Carter, he could see the Cretaceous refracted as panorama, diorama, hurtled dogwood and the swamp having the aspect of the museum. It was a "natural habitat," Robles thought, and put the quote marks in, the biggest and goddamndest habitat of then all, a Cretaceous replicate and just the most remarkable thing. Scratching his ass in the curling sunlight, trying to bring himself to some kind of accommodation, Robles peered at his strange and attractive partner, then turned to see the mesh fences in the distance, the fences walling off the compound, holding it through paradoxical electrification and wire from the gigantic animals that would otherwise in their ignorance blunder through. Protect the animals, protect the travelers, a mutuality of indifference. That was the point of the tour, wasn't it? But they had promised Dix one kill. A major-league *Triceratops*. That was where the center lay now.

He didn't want to think about it. Killing *Triceratops* was not Robles' ticket, he would direct the fire, whisper words of encouragement to Dix, estimate the windage and the burn ratio and the number of meters toward the beast but the kill was all Dix's responsibility, the Combine had made that quite clear, a line had been drawn (just like that for the dinosaurs) and Robles would not have to cross it. I'm here safe, he said, you hear that Muffy? Muffy sighed, clutched a pink pillow in her pretty hands, rubbed her face in the crease, then gave a long, purling groan. I know you don't want to talk about it, he said. No one wants to talk about it. We all have our jobs, we're all safe, aren't we? Dix is the major-league *Triceratops* hunter while you and I make sweet, sweet love under the dogwoods, isn't that right? He

listened, heard the catch in her breath, the tiny acquiescence in her exhalation. Right, he said, that is exactly right.

He strode toward the flat, peered out again. Past the enclosure: past the abyss dug into this hollow by Camp Paradox itself (that was Muffy's name for it, it would stay, it was the right term) was the landscape. The shallow depressions, curved mountains, all of this curiously without color like the beasts themselves; small puffs from hidden volcanoes and buttes, those commas and exclamation points of nature. Later, much later, the strata would accumulate: these would be mines, the strata valleys and mountains, over there perhaps downtown Helena. The volcanoes, attended to, the fix of attention, gurgled like beasts, made little whickering sounds in the darkness, and the beasts hidden by the arc and incline of the landscape gurgled like volcanoes. In and out, that shuddering identity.

Robles shook his head, not in awe, awe was not the proper term for any of this. On your sixth voyage back, now much more than a guide (if less than a hunter), you either internalized some of this and put it away or you perished through the implications of the circumstance, just let it carry you under. No, it was the lack of anticipation, his strange indifference in this first dawn which was stunning; never had he felt this way before, now the period had no effect upon him. He was rising to confront fire and the beast but he might as well have been in Brooklyn Complex, working out some kind of appropriations plan. That was how much it meant to him now. Even burrowing within Muffy had had that blandness—her deeps which once had seemed magnificent, arching now gave him back only small and splintering visions of himself, little feathered mysteries in the dark. Here in what would become Helena sometime, the mines were yet to be cast from this crystal unrest, the strata and volcanic ash lay millennia in the future as did his own unspeakable conception. To this place, which should have been sacred—Robles felt that this was the only sanctity which could be grasped, all the rest of it was ritual—had come the crowd of travelers with Dix, host and moderator at their front, to sight the huge beasts for the promised international, televised, major-league kill. What fearful symmetry, Robles said. Who would have dreamt that? Hand or eye? Are you up yet?

Amphibian noises from the pallet, water and earth. She flipped a cover at him. I'm up, she said, thanks. What are you talking about?

Poetry, Robles said. Old poetry.

You mean unwritten poetry, Muffy said. Won't be written for ages.

Camp Paradox, Robles said. Camp out of time.

You said it, she said. I didn't. Why don't you come here and lay with me? Create some more paradox.

He looked at her, the shadows dressing her nakedness, casting arrows and curvatures of shape. Better not, he said, everyone will be up soon. What if they saw us locked to ground, playing the old snuffle-snaffle? What then, Muffy?

She yawned. Part of the tour, she said.

I'm a guide, Robles said. You're a counselor. Not professional, it wouldn't look right at all.

What do you think they're doing? Any different than we?

Dix doesn't, Robles said. He doesn't do anything like that at all, ever. Remember? He said that once. A violation of the temple of the holy spirit. He's a fanatic too, not just a great group mind.

You're too serious for me, Muffy said. You're too much of a speculator. I don't have that kind of stuff

going on in my head. To me it's all green thoughts, everywhere. Whatever you say, then.

Robles walked to the pallet, looked down at her, then knelt, touched her elbow gently, felt the yielding of the flesh, watched as her mouth opened slightly for entrance or reproof, it hardly mattered, with Muffy Carter they mingled, they were all the same. Everything mingled and intermixed deep in the sweet probe. Murder coming, yes, anachronism aplenty in the deep Cretaceous, but it was all the same to her and everything would come out even in those dark, sweet depths. No copulation, nothing like that in the sendback, the Administrators had said, but Muffy paid as much attention to that as any guide, which was none at all. With good contraception and a tight, banging constraint, what was the difference? she had asked. A pregnancy would be silly, bad luck for all of them, but really, who was to know? What was the difference? There would be no pregnancy and everything happening here then, even the kill, would be an abstraction. The death of the dinosaurs was as diminished as the pregnancy which would not occur: they became in that cosmic accident fungi, heaps of bone trapped in that fungus, then ash, then fossils, trapped in the clumsy and insistent onrush of time. In the new millennium, only a few bones and suggestions then to mark their passage. Come on, she said, get right aboard. Ride me like a hobby horse, ride me like before. Come, come.

Robles felt himself rolling toward her, then yanked himself away. No, he said, not now. It wouldn't work out, it wouldn't be right.

Then go away, she said. She stared at him. I mean it. Just go. Don't hover .

Yes, he said, you're right. He tried to stand, felt his knees lock, sank into the dirt, vertigo pulling at him then. You never get used to it, he said. Do you? I can't take it. But it's never been like this before.

Don't get sentimental on me, Muffy said. I'm just a guide.

Maybe you never get used to it, he said. It's all the cartage outside. Hundreds of thousands of tons. How do you get used to it?

Maybe you should pass me my clothes, let me pull myself together then.

You can be blasé, Robles said. That's because you don't have to think about it. You just point and give figures. But I'm supposed to be able to give *interpretation* . It's the intellectual part of me.

You're a deep fellow, she said. You're beyond me. If fate and circumstance hadn't thrown us together, who knows how we might have been? Is it too late for us now? Will we survive? Time will tell, two hundred million years of it.

I'm afraid of Dix, Robles said. Can you understand that? I don't like him. I don't know what he wants.

He wants to shoot *Triceratops*, dummy. That's why he's here.

Not *Triceratops*, Robles said. That's just a symbol, whatever you call it. He wants something else. I don't know where your clothes are. You're going to have to get them yourself.

You're the one who threw them somewhere.

This isn't a hotel, Robles said fiercely. This isn't a one-night stand. We're buried in this place, now, not in the past, can't you see that? It's no joke.

Sure, she said, you're always so right, I'll find my own clothes. See if I care. You throw, I go. He's just a tourist, she said in a different tone. Maybe a host, maybe a personality with an entourage, but he wants what the rest of them do. A few pictures, a little admiration, a thrill to touch his insulated life.

The others didn't want to kill.

We didn't let them, remember? We changed the rules for Dix, that's all. They wanted to kill, all right. That was the lure all along, don't you know that?

He curled an arm over the floor, found a shirt half crouched beneath the pallet, tossed it to her. You're not all dumb, he said. You play that way but you can figure things out pretty good,

Muffy took the shirt from his hand, ran a hand through her hair, patting it down, then pushed her head through. They're all the same to me, she said. Man with a plan, man on a mission, one way or the other.

In the distance, a tyrannosaur screamed, that odd, trapped sound arcing to penetration, then began to whoop with the regularity of a siren. The sound was bucolic at this moment, fed not his apprehension but what Robles wanted to take as heightened perception. The sound mixed into foliage, became oddly comforting. Trees in the diorama rustled harmlessly. Muffy squeezed his hand, peered over his shoulder. Here he comes, she said, there he comes, for heaven's sake. Look at him break water.

Break water it did. Not a tyrannosaur then but a major-league *Triceratops*. Robles had seen them in the distance many times but this emergent *Triceratops* in the near bog was something different, was a *stunning* son of a bitch, disproportionate but elegant in the sudden proximity. Thirty feet long, half that high, three discolored horns, greenish at this angle, the huge, comic neck frill, those horns jutting at odd angles above the eye and yet at the center of that movement an odd stillness. The gray-brown mass stolid, almost bovine then as it emerged from a crouch, shoot itself toward land, nuzzled at the ground then closed in on a magnolia so furiously leaved that the trunk was invisible. Began to pull at the discolored flowers.

Cute, isn't he? Muffy said.

Oh yes, Robles said, that's the word.

Makes you want to go over and pet them. Ride the *Triceratops*, Daniel? Want to take another seat? I'm not the only hobbyhorse around.

Go to hell, Robles said without anger. Take it on the tour.

A short-frilled ceratopid, Muffy said in a measured voice, tending to have large, unpaired nose horns. The horns are more defensive than instruments of hostility, however, and to avoid injury resulting from combat, the *Triceratops* relies heavily upon bluff displays and evasive maneuvers.

You do that well.

They pay me in time and experience, Muffy said. It's all hypnotic therapy anyway. All those misspent, unspent nights.

My nights weren't so great either, Robles said. I think we all had a pretty bad time. Why else would we show up at Camp Paradox?

Because it's what we're paid to do. See the mountains and ride the beast. And stay out of the way of anachronism.

Smart, Robles said, you're real smart.

You learn something in the service, Muffy said. They watched the *Triceratops* chew contentedly, leaves and twigs tumbling into its throat, no drop at all. The *Triceratops* ate with great delicacy, stripped the

magnolia, then seemed to shrug and sink into the bog again. Shoulder high, it wobbled colorlessly away.

Full of purpose, Robles said. More purpose than we have.

Colbert theorizes, Muffy said professionally, that the horns represent individual, random solutions to a common problem of display and protection, that they may indeed represent selectivity by being a kind of sexual lure. Hey, she said, you're not listening. This is very interesting. You ought to pay attention.

I'm paying attention, Robles said. I paid attention to *Triceratops* and now I'm listening to you. And thinking of Dix. The man is dangerous. He wants more than a kill, he wants the beasts to suffer. I can tell that from his face.

You're a perceptive guy, aren't you? How did you get to know so much? It's just a job. You're not responsible for what goes on here, that decision was made by the administration. I think that Dix just wants a trophy like the rest of us. Maybe *Triceratops* is his hobbyhorse, that's all.

He came out as if on cue, Robles said. That one seemed to be performing for us. Did you ever think that maybe they were waiting, that all this is some kind of show they've set up for the tourists and we're the ones being watched?

I think you are showing symptoms of needing a rest, Muffy said. Maybe you can take one. But not until this is finished.

You don't think maybe that all of this is programmed? The dinosaurs too? That we're being watched and observed?

You're too deep for me, Muffy said. She adjusted her shirt, stood gracefully. Halfway there, she said. Now I have to look for some pants.

There's too much going on, Robles said. I never thought it out until now, I just took it for granted. But it's impossible, he thought. It's impossible, that was it. Camp Paradox in fact as well as in name, *none* of this should be happening, not by the rights they had established.

A bell clattered behind them, hardly dinosaur sound, but a technological, post-op summons. In the light they lived by bells and those cruising forms. Turning, Robles peered past Muffy, past the transparent arc of the tent wall, and could see beyond them the low structures of the ranch, the five or six tents which with the Transporter comprised Camp Paradox. Small puffs of smoke vented from those tents, little puffs of light and the suggestion of movement within. Reveille. Inside the domed structure at an oblique angle from the tents, Dix himself would be standing now, pacing on the curved ground, staring through the aperture, looking for his *Triceratops*, measuring for the kill. Well, Robles said when the clattering had ceased, I guess today's the day.

Hunting time, Muffy said. Get a square into the belly and onto the range. Poor little warrior.

Dix? He's a contest winner.

No, Muffy said, not Dix. He's got what he'll be getting. You. You're the one. All suffering because of your rhinoceros out there.

It isn't that, Robles said, it isn't that at all. Can't we forget this? Can't we let it be?

That was your decision all the time. You can come and play inside if you want. It isn't all dead things.

No, Robles said. He shook his head. I told you, I can't. But we're doing something wrong, Muffy. It

isn't right, not what we're doing here. This is not the way it was supposed to be. Bringing Dix to Camp Paradox, giving him a gun, setting him loose here.

This is hardly the time, she said. That was all decided a long time ago, worked out by people like you. Let's make reveille and go out on the trails and watch Dix a-hunting go. Then we'll be out of here.

We're never out of here.

You're out of me. Wouldn't you like to get back inside? You can, you know. It's what you want to do. What do you want? She grasped his hand, bent it suddenly at the wrist, sent a splinter of pain up his arm. Robles shrieked. Come on, she said. Say it, do it. What do you want?

Anachronism, Robles said, rubbing his arm, shaking the wrist. Time out of time. I want it to mesh. I want confluence, can you understand that?

Do business, she said, keep your eye on the sparrow. Go sparrow-hunting, let Dix take primordial rhinoceros over there.

Business, he said. There seemed nothing more to say. Not introspective under the best conditions, the convolutions of the tour had made him utterly unable to cope. Big business.

Not for Dix, Muffy said, taking his hand, rubbing the arm expertly, working blood into the sprain. Not for him though.

Pleasure?

Try again, Muffy said.

FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

Rhinolike as they might have been, *Triceratops* nonetheless dropped eggs. The cutting edge theories had been wrong: they weren't warm-blooded, they did not carry or suckle their young. Robles had taken it badly, seeing his teleology upset. He had envisioned *Triceratops* as a pinnacle: first the fire-breathers, then the vegetarians, then the long, galumphing *Struthiomimus*, big as hangarports, dense as earth, two brains, one prick. They all laid eggs, Robles believed, except *Triceratops*, the advance model, major-league *Triceratops* had vaulted to the next stage. Except that it hadn't. Like all the rest, it laid its seed in the cold, cold ground, abandoned it there. No home on the range for *Triceratops*, no family life at dusk. They were no different than all of the others. In that first expedition, his fragile hold upon evolution had disintegrated, the *Triceratops* had fallen from its distant height to the deserts of inanition and stupidity with all the rest of them. In a sense, Robles felt he had never survived that knowledge. There was no evolution then, no discrimination, only accident and the huge, dark, scuttling forms.

Robles continued to write: An enlarged fragment of shell mounted in the Crete Musée des Beaux Arts, tyrannosaur suspected as keeper, the outer surface not smooth but stucco-like, brought from the Wyoming wastes, one of eighteen preserved for the new and refurbished Musée. Nothing within, the most sophisticated radiology had indicated, but of course it was early in cycle. What would one do with a tyrannosaur? Lady Carter, I seem to have a tyrannosaur on the premises, he is consuming the wallpaper and has most discomfited the butler. What would we do, Lady Carter? Oh never mind, James, the little creature will find its way back to the nest at last. Let us have some stucco.

He struggled to put it down, relying upon primitive implements and means otherwise unacceptable. Oh, to stroll those wastes, to go egg-gathering in the weak Cretaceous sun, return then to Paradox, on what careful and exquisite omelette we could dine. To dine on unhatched *Triceratops*, essence of *oeuf*, to curl

with Muffy amongst the dogwood and magnolia, concealed from the prowlings of Dix, safe from his scatterings, to chow down this thrifty forerunner of our modern rhinoceros and ostrich. This is not merely a prize but an opportunity unafforded by *Triceratops* who granted no such leavings. Joint by joint, inch by inch, one can surely chow down this unspeakable history.

And so he continued—

THE NEST

It had been a stunt, in fact. Rig a contest, get someone like Dix to win, bring him to Camp Paradox with appropriate publicity, let equipment film good times here. A television personality, Dix carried his own equipment and crew. It had seemed acceptable at the start, had in fact seemed a brilliant plan. Robles had no objection. Robles, knowledgeable, was all for it. Something had to be done and soon, otherwise they would lose the post.

It was time to alter the situation. Business in Cretaceous Montana had collapsed, Camp Paradox was no longer pulling its new millennial weight. Sour clumps of travelers drifted amongst the chuck wagons and the anachronistically styled riding enclosures, looking grim. The dinosaurs, shy even in better times, could hardly be prevailed upon to circle the ranch and were often unavailable for days while the travelers stared glumly at one another and disdained the holes. Bring back a celebrity to go track the dinosaurs in habitat, it had seemed an audacious conception, yes, but what else was there? There were simply very few new ideas and administration had its own problems, had left them more or less to deal with themselves.

Ultimately, the idea had come from Robles. He could fix responsibility at no other point, it had to be his. What wouldn't work as vista might if it were given some aspect of plot: the quest of a celebrity figure to unravel the secrets of his past. Of course Dix could not be enlisted straight off, that would not work, he would have to be taken in the guise of a contest winner but contests themselves were easy enough to manage. Robles had rigged more than his share in another profession, at another time. And Dix had looked good, he had seemed at the start to be precisely what they had needed, personable, jaunty, a quizzical tilt to the head that bespoke intelligence, irony, and a serious interest in the problem of Camp Paradox. Because it is both there and not there, am I right? Dix had said. Because it exists both in and out of time, the only millionaire tourist trap in Montana that is ecologically sound, is that right? They had laughed. Dix had seemed quite reasonable at the start, it had been a pleasure to tilt the contest toward him, make the business of a celebrity winner credible, test things out then.

Who could have known then how it would turn out? Who knew that Dix had an assassin's eye, a hunter's desire? There was no way to tell, not until the announcement. Not until Dix had started to go public with his plans to land a big one back there and carry it back so that the world could share in the meat of his accomplishment. Grinning, showing sketches of *Triceratops* to the cameras, Dix had been Everyman's version of a winner, smiling at them. We'll bring 'em back alive, Dix said. Oh, not the dinosaurs, he said, winking. They'll be dead as tumbleweed., But the *hunters*, the expeditionaries, we'll be alive and we'll have film the likes of which we'll never have again to play for you.

Let's call it off, Robles had said to Arness, who had played the role of the Committee then. Let's just annul the whole thing. I'll take the blame, we can say that we hadn't calculated the paradoxical effect of a shooting or of transporting someone without special biological delousing. I don't care what we say, we can figure out something.

Can't do it, Arness said, you wanted publicity, we have it now. There's too much. We call it off in public, we look bad.

We can say that there are dinosaur eggs in the machines, that the transporter is clogged. What the hell do

I care? Robles had said. He had been eager to concede fault, compelled in fact, the need for self-abnegation had seized him, made him shake. This guy is no good, he said. And no good gets worse.

A contest is a contest, Arness had said. We got too much attention, you did even better than we hoped. We can't break it now without looking even worse.

But killing the beast! Killing a *Triceratops* —

Arness said, We've studied this. There's no anachronism, no risk. If we can go stomping around there sixty-seven million years back, we can kill a *Triceratops*. All of this will be fossilization in no time.

We can't be sure of that, Robles said. We can't be sure of anything. Maybe the *Triceratops* he kills is the grandfather of Gawaine. Maybe he misses and kills a tyrannosaur who found Atlantis.

All subsumed, Arness said, all of it eaten up by the million of years. The dinosaurs left no trace, remember. We don't even know what they looked like. We don't know if they had pricks or cunts or how the males sniffed each other out. No trace means no risk. So let him shoot one. It will be good for business and we need business. Private enterprise, remember?

Yes, Robles remembered. He knew everything about private enterprise back then, hadn't he been living it back and forth for all these years? Muffy Carter was private enterprise, so was the transporter, so was all of it. You took your chances, you stayed outside the system and made the best of it you could and the rest of it was bullshit, that was his motto. But this is different, he said to Arness. This is a dangerous guy, someone who thinks that the shadow and the act are the same, like all these communications types. I tell you, I don't like it, Robles said.

We don't like it either, Arness said, but we're into the situation and that's all. It's too late. He'll murder us if we back out now what with the exposure he has. He'll make us the laughingstock of late night. He'll say that the whole thing is a studio job and there's no prehistory there, just some hanging loops and video machines. We can't take it. We can't put up with it. So we go through and hope for the best.

Trusting, Robles said, we've always been so trusting. But it's going to catch up with us. We're going to have real trouble.

You and that little Muffy, Arness said, you can keep an eye on him. Muffy can control him, maybe. He likes women, he likes them small.

He better keep his hands off Muffy, Robles said, surprising himself. He just better leave her alone. To Dix later, at their briefing session, he had said, All right, you got to do it, you go ahead and take care of it. Shoot one, get your pictures. But we're going to be careful, you hear me? We're going to watch this all the way. This isn't a safari, it isn't *The African Queen*. You get into real trouble here and you don't back out.

The transporter's going to fail? Dix said. Is that the deal? And we'll be trapped back there then?

The transporter never fails and we got six backup for any problem. No, Robles said, I mean other stuff. Stuff you better be aware of.

Your stuffed animals going to eat me alive?

No, Robles said, it isn't that. I won't let you bait me, he thought. That is your skill, baiting guests into reactions, but it won't happen to me. I can deal with this, I can control the situation.

You better pay attention, he said. You better watch what's going on there and you'd better listen to me.

I listen to everyone, Dix said. That's my own zone of operations, mister, and you better leave that to me.

Leave that to him. Everything in the end got displaced, then. In the night, the tyrannosaurs ran in spasms, small gasps of effort, ran like horses down the rutted streams of the Cretaceous. The grunts of the *Triceratops*, the glide of *Struthiomimus*, the whine of tyrannosaur splitting the weak sun. He was, he knew then, absolutely dedicated, part of the period, unable to see Dix as the others might. The situation had overtaken them.

CAMP PARADOX DOWNRANGE

Once, Robles had had clearly defined plans, before the ethos of it began to crawl into him. The plans were two years with the dinosaurs, just two years shuttling in the transport, pushing tourists around the swamps and bogs of that impossible, riotous past and then he would be done with it, would have enough in hand to make something of himself in the tried and true third millennium.

He didn't have to be a range bum like some of them turned out to be, those who got prehistoric and future all mixed up and spewed it all in the transporter. No, Robles had had a sense of command, more command than that when Muffy had moved in and had attracted his attention, the third of the hostesses but the one that had fully caught his attention. He knew that he and Muffy had a connection, could amount to something, but only if they kept it in defined context. But it was palpable, the trade was clear, you gave them your skills and risk—and your sense of balance too because who could sup with *Struthiomimus* and return to Texas fully sane?—and tried to hold on and at the other side of the pipeline you had security.

He agreed with Muffy: they all started that way and some of them even held on to it but it was hard. Camp Paradox broadened your perspective, broadened it perhaps too much, showed you the end of things disguised as the beginning. It isn't the anachronism though, Muffy said, or the fear of getting tangled in a branch and lying down for good, it isn't the fear of one of these shy beasts gobbling you down. no, it's something else.

Maybe that we're not supposed to screw here, Robles said. Could that be it?

Yeah, sure, Muffy said, I sure do like to screw and maybe that's it. Celibacy will get you in the midst of rut, right?

But that wasn't it, of course. They both knew that, had agreed not to discuss it. It was the intimation front and back that got you, that poised and terrible certainty as you clutched your way through prehistory, taking the tourists around and showing them this or that out of the guidebook, the sense that you were at all times at some dense and thrilling flashpoint and that everything else, all of it further or later, was of no consequence whatsoever. The beasts were too huge, the tourists too stupid, the thunder of the transporter shattering in its impact. There were only extremes, it would turn a dead man into an ironist. This crawled in, centered you after a while, simply would not go away.

The idea had been—he tried to talk this out with Muffy now and then but somehow he could not make it right, maybe they had never been meant to understand one another—that the dinosaurs would change his life. Not Camp Paradox, not the tours, but the beasts themselves. Wasn't that it? If circumstances, if this malevolent and despairing twenty-first century crowding in on him and his wouldn't do it for him, if he had become misfit amidst the holography and the apocalyptic recreation, then perhaps the Cretaceous would make things different. Here on the trails he could dance with *Triceratops*, leap the fantastic with *Tyrannosaurus*, go trapping for *himself* in that primeval, casual ooze, learn from the nesting of these peculiar and intransigently shy beasts how he might make his own nest finally.

You don't want to nest, Muffy said. No man does. You want to fly, to scatter, to kick the nests down. Any man who doesn't know that hasn't found himself yet. But that's okay, she said. I have my own troubles too. We're all in flight. You want biography, I've got as much as yours and more disastrous.

What they didn't tell you, he wanted to point out to her but he couldn't, there was simply too much he could not discuss, what you didn't know until you learned it agonizingly yourself, slogging every step of it, was that oldest of truths: that darkness you carried within yourself was your own, *yours*. Wherever you were, there was that prehistoria of the spirit and it was of a numbing equalization. Under that ancient but familiar dark with Muffy, cheating a little (but all of them did, everyone knew that, it was the most laughable rule of the service), soaring and bucking and snaffling like the *Triceratops* which obsessed him, Robles had had his little moments now and then, his flickers of possibility. Certainly in the earlier period when the tourists with money and cameras came to open their eyes to the past and gamble at night it had been kind of fun, before Camp Paradox had begun to dwindle—like its age, like all apocalyptic hobbies—into disuse. That had been fun then, screwing Muffy within hairsbreadth of the tourists when the sun went down, sharing information on the beasts during the day as if none of the other part existed and they were truly in the service of the tourists. But as that and the travelers went away, as the harder necessities of the doubled advancing time stream (moving one to one, there was no other way that the committee could manage, the situation would have been uncontrollable otherwise) closed in, that feeling of possibility, the sheer illicitness of all connection drained. Robles began to understand why the guides looked as they did and why most of them never got out. It was as dense and troubled, as empty and desperate here as in the twenty-first when you turned inward to the situation and it was impossible to project it upon the beasts as had been managed at the outset.

But you couldn't tell the males or females apart, not at a distance. As Muffy had said, that most central information, at least for the explorers, was a mystery along with the private lives of dinosaurs. All you knew were that they clumped together and that the species did not seem to really intermingle. These animals were helpless to the elements, protected only by their size. Surely the stupidest of all creatures, stupid as the trees they ate, they cruised the landscape like distended toys, parodies of the barnyard. Even if you could ship them back, even if there was a way to risk all the rules of time and circumstances: who would want them? What could they possibly yield?

But that had been earlier. That was when Robles had still been fighting for some sense of possibility, some kind of function, before it had all collapsed and he realized that he was just another staring, stricken guide, nothing else. Those thoughts, that concern far polarities had been before the idea of the contest, before they had rigged it for Dix, before the intrepid Dix had appeared, filled with guns and plans. We'll kill one and film the whole thing. The first prehistoric hunt, Dix had said. It will be a sensation. At last they'll see something so big, such a piece of work that they'll be able to give up their own problems and watch the general collapse. That is *media!* Dix had said, and I am your media star.

Well, he had been through that before. He had given his warnings for all the effect they had, and could do no more. Gonna get me one of those, Dix said, and let the folks at home share it all. Give them a good time, let them follow along. Maybe he was right. Maybe that was the truth and Dix had the final and absolute handle. Maybe so, and it was Robles, trapped with his barnyard and with Muffy's sly anomalies, who was the fool. Maybe it was Robles then who was the guy really out of time, more millennial detritus, that was all.

So there came a time when you had to let go, had to let matters take their course, reasonable or unreasonable, there was no other way. If Dix was right, then all of Camp Paradox from the start had been an entertainment device, a dude ranch set up for home movies. When he said that to Muffy she had been extra calm, another layer of disdain coming over her as if she had been prepared for more of Robles's silliness. Let's see what he gets, she said. Maybe he'll run at the first sign of tyrannosaur. These

aren't guys of will and courage, she said, they get off from performing behind glass.

We're all behind glass. They ship us back that way in the transporter.

Don't get sophisticated on me, she said. Let's just see what will happen. It doesn't make any difference any, other way, does it? I mean, nothing could be worse for business than what we have. So they would see, that was the arrangement. This will end too, Muffy pointed out, Camp Paradox was a fad, a phase like almost everything else. Dix himself would be back in the studios in just a little time.

Think of the litter here, Robles said. Think of what we're leaving behind. I mean that makes some kind of difference, doesn't it?

No it doesn't, Muffy said. She smiled at him. If the centuries ate the dinosaurs then they'll gobble up even the non-degradables. A sensible woman. But everyone was sensible by this time, fixed on outcome. Matters had counseled rationality, Dix too was a businessman. A *Triceratops* shoot was another diversion, that was all.

It was this reasonableness which had left all of them so unprepared, Robles came to think later. They had watched not only sense but passion leached from them here, had left the passion to the beasts, had identified the beasts then with display and had themselves curled in. By assuming control, they had lost control. Early, early on they had learned to screw quietly, emit no sounds, trouble neither downrange anachronism nor the tourists nor the night, wheezing out perfectly controlled, soundless orgasms, teeth sheathed in the other's neck. Oh Muffy had given acquiescence in that prehistoric night but never voice, there was no voice for any of them and that perhaps was the problem. *Tyrannosaurus* had that whine but the others made no sounds, only the clumping and crush of vegetation, the deep well of their impression to mark passage. Not barnyard but dirigible, not dinosaurs but huge, misaligned aircraft, Muffy had said.

But had not said this thrashing beside him; during those times she had—ah, correctness!—said nothing at all.

THE HUNT

Oh paradox! Dix thought, paradox, most ingenious paradox; leaving the thin straggle of tourists back at the camps, coming hard on *Triceratops*, his body curled to the stalk. Free, free! free for the moment of those controlling bastards in the tent, free of Robles who wanted to abort everything, he could now and at last concentrate on this dreadful and necessary task.

The Magnum, he knew, would more than distort the hapless rhinoceros before him. No, it would *reassemble* the beast, turn the rhino head to pulp, send those stupid eyes, by globule, to the far distance. Bring a video for this, track it for permanence? Hardly likely, this would destroy his audience and he was not there for that, he was to lend comfort to them. Maybe he should have saved this for his private collection but no, no, he wanted no record of slaughter, simply its evidence. Not too long now, he thought. He had the bastard leveled. It stood downrange fifty or sixty yards, shyly bobbing its head, giving him greedy little glances in the sudden adopted frieze, then poking and snaffling at the flowered branch. Dead meat on the hoof then, waiting for him.

Somewhere behind, in what they called Camp Paradox, Dix supposed that Robles and his Muffy were locked to their own task, thrashing away in the bush. He would never ask them, never say anything about it either, but really, what else could they be doing? What was the point of being a loser and blasted back to this kind of convict's exile unless at least you could hump among the beasts, feel the floor of the forest primeval? At least that was the way that Dix figured it. Think of it, he said, talking for the sake of talking, *Triceratops* did not respond to sound, was probably congenitally deaf, gobbling on the leaves anyway,

what if Robles loaded her up, got her pregnant? What if the transport failed, not that such a thing was possible, they said? What if the child could get dropped off here sixty-seven million years or whatever behind the timeline? What about that, folks, hey? he said, practicing a riff which would work sooner or later on the concentrated channel. Would the child become its ancestor? Or would the comet due in pretty swift just wipe them out without sunken trace, just as promised? It was something to investigate, he thought, something that might be worth discussing when he brought his true adventures back for them and as he thought of the two of them humping, the leafy violation amidst the beasts, a splinter of envy torqued Dix, spun him, made him grunt with the savagery, the *bullet* of his own need until he put it behind, focusing then on the more immediate circumstance.

Oh paradox, paradox! That was a major-league *Triceratops* all right and as he laid it out in fire on the hot, grabbing flora of this diminished prehistory, so he would lay out himself, justify this trip, his life, his circumstance, his sudden and disgraceful need. Camp Paradox had become a cartoon, a vision of stuffed animals and farmyard greenery but this fucker taking the flowers in the sun, that was not a cartoon, that was a big one, the biggest one he could bag and in so doing, change everything. I want him, Dix thought, I want him badly, don't ask why, that's a different thing but I am going to have him. Somewhere in the distance he could dream that they were nesting, could glimpse the other *Triceratops* this had left behind, a family of *Triceratops*, Muffy had said, gathered together and the hell with that. The vision twinkled, was clear for a moment, even clearer than the beast before him: there were those rhinos massed with one another like Robles and Muffy, blinking and seizing in the light. Dix began to move then with small, persistent steps, focused upon his own rhinoceros in the distance, feeling the morning, the vast Cretaceous now draped on him like a cloak. Oh, those creatures would grunt and mutter from indeterminate distance but here, focused, it would be different. Just him and his rhino then, making that oldest of equations.

The animal stood calmly, poised for him in its careful and sonorous fashion, the weight of the Magnum both jarring and comforting. Prowling through the damp plain, the Magnum against his palm, Dix saw that the low dogwood had already shed *its* blossoms, was stripped to a bark which had the blandness of an uncovered bog, prowling toward the major-league *Triceratops* downrange, he stepped on pink, white and red petals which marked a path swatched carelessly, almost defiantly. The sassafras trees with their leaves of star or circle stood slender and delicate as the legs of *Struthiomimus*, past the trees and the other foliage Dix could see less trodden paths lead from the compounds.

He wasn't the only one who had been on these trails. But he was the first, he knew, to have the courage of the kill, that was something of which he was convinced. He came to a small rise, casting *Triceratops* slightly to his left and then, in the distance, just past what had been his downrange, he saw the nests.

There they were after all, just as he had always known there would have been. Family life in the rhinos. Of course he had been right. At intervals that seemed to be the length of *Triceratops* itself, maybe thirty feet, were five or six sites and as he peered through the foliage he could see a suggestion of bodies clumped, the animals massed then toward some purpose. Here was a crevice and in the distance another, those crevices nests, all occupied, and Dix felt that if he could focus in the most determined way, could squint, could find some utter concentration he would see friendly *Triceratops* emerge to stare, head bowed, showing the frills. How crazy was he? Was this hallucination or had he merely contrived a story around real nests? It was a serious question, something to consider but only later on. When this was over. He had better do something soon, though, nests or whatever, because his customer down there in the distance was going to get nervous soon, real nervous, and would start charging one way or the other very soon. So that was it then, you had to attack the situation at its source, go back to the tangled roots of your history, sixty-seven million years back there. Get into a machine and go to Camp Paradox, seek it there and if you found it—well, if you found it, what then? What next? That was impossible to judge. There was such indeterminacy of circumstance that you had to kill your way out of it, had to hack your

way through this and that, simply to render some kind of explanation. Well, so much for that dog in the distance. He crouched, dropped to a hunter's position, alertness, sighted the animal. Oh, this is going to make a good one, he said. This is going to make the best, I'm going to *spatter* the son of a bitch, I'm going—

He hadn't heard Robles or Muffy behind, there was no way from the constancy of his self-absorption that he would have tracked them. He hadn't heard them, they had been cast off suddenly, not only in space but from his mind, a clean sheet dropping between his perception and their actuality but now, suddenly, he was aware of the movement behind him, a clash of figures who in no way belonged (like him) in that landscape. He had forgotten them, had crept out on his own and, locked to himself, had forgotten and now he was going to pay for it. He could see them coming up behind him but at the same time he had to keep the damned beast focused, get it in his sights or lose it altogether, try to defend two opposed sights then. Fascinated by a close-up view of the dead eye of *Triceratops* caught in sudden magnification, Dix could feel all within himself tumbling toward that death, that blind, reaching stupidity. Get back I he shouted. Get back or I'll shoot you first! But that was bluff, he was gripped by that dead eye, felt himself arcing toward the bottom of that sensibility and then slowly the transfer lifted just enough to enable him to flex his finger, lack in the sight. Now, he thought, *now* before they catch me, before it's sixty-seven million years later, now I've got him and began to count out the seconds while trying to calculate windage, calculate the sudden and frantic movement of the beast which at last, possessed by its stupidity, had sensed something going on there, not the gun but Robles thrashing through vegetation, bringing the animal to attention. Too late, almost too late then.

Dix fired.

The beast *exploded*, even as Robles's hands reached him, he could feel *Triceratops* slowly atomizing through the corridors of the trees, liquid and fire dancing away from the shattered bone and then, one horn uptilted as if in salute, the *Triceratops* plunged.

ROBLES TRANSMOGRIFIED

He did it, Robles said and sprinted away from Muffy, I didn't think the son of a bitch would but he *did*, he said, moving frantically, pushing her away, scuttled then through the mud and greenery, feeling himself moving not toward Dix but at same odd cross-angles to his own purpose. Blood had exploded in geysers from the beast but the *Triceratops* was moving nonetheless, moving with uncommon speed, rushing toward Dix with a determination that Robles could not have calculated. Dix hurled the Magnum, began to scream, words that Robles could not make out. *Get down!* Robles shouted, although he wanted the son of a bitch to die. It was reflexivity, it was the good stuff they had been taught in training. He needed to save Dix if only to protect his own position. *Roll*, he shouted, roll away from it!

But Dix, down and yelling could not move and the *Triceratops* was upon him. Robles scrambled, fell to his knees, lurched toward Dix, was able to get a hand on him, felt their connection in the sucking ooze and as he did so, knew with the absolute and perfect perception he had sought in and out of time all his life that Dix was not going to die, that Dix would get away with this, would live to tell the tale and that it would be *Robles* who was going to perish. Get away, he shouted, this time to Muffy, for God's sake, *save yourself!* knowing that it had all been set from the beginning, their own scuttling copulations too, and then as he tried to raise Dix hopelessly, use the man as a shield, the beast was already on top of him, hurling Dix with its snout to the side, seizing Robles in its huge grasp. There was blood all over him, all over them and then pressure and Robles felt suddenly transcendent, not like the transporter which yanked you here and yanked you there but different, a true conquest, a true sense of control then masked as the greatest pain he had ever known. Dix was screaming something again but it was Muffy's voice to which Robles, dying, felt attuned: she was saying something to him, something which would explain

everything and if he could only attend he would understand but she had become very old, she had become older than the pyramids, than the dawn of man, than the ascent of the great beasts, she had receded from him at great and greater speed and he could not hear her, could not reach.

Somehow, it no longer mattered. It didn't matter at all.

AFTER THE GALLERY

Later, deep in the darkness, the paleontologist asleep beside her, Maria remembered what she had seen in the gallery, that sudden awareness before he had pulled her away. At the skeletal foot, shiny and neat as an ornament (had anyone else seen this?) a cylindrical skull, the eye hollows glinting in the received light.

Now what would that mean? the Japanese wondered and thought of the skull for a moment and the haiku the paleontologist had made for her:

In the light the bird

Caught in Cretaceous flight as

The bone talks to us.

The haiku suddenly in the sleep toward which she descended curling around the skull, a ribbon around the little ornament and she wanted to push that ribbon aside and look more closely, see the final and evident truth she knew was there—but it was impossible, she was too tired, she could not make that separation. Sleep took her, the holovision playing on soundlessly in the room showing described images of the host amidst the dinosaurs.

The bone did not talk to her anymore, then.