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FOODSTUFF

THE BOAT TAKING ME upriver broke down the first afternoon out of Stinktown. Doug, the boatman, ran in close to the bank, apologized for what he said would be only a slight delay, and disappeared belowdecks to fuss with his malfunctioning motor or balky galley slaves, whichever.

Till now, I'd kept pretty much to myself, and so had the other passenger. Which suited me just fine. I'd been bunged up on arrival and spent some time in sickbay -- jumping through a spacetime anomaly is about as much fun as riding in a spin dryer full of rocks -- and I still felt rotten. I was behind schedule, too, which made me feel rottener. There had been a third passenger when we set out, a bland-looking fellow who got off before we even left the marshes behind. The whole time he'd been aboard he just sat on a Crate and played a recorder, with a beatific look on his face. He played well, coaxing out of that simple instrument of his what I supposed was something by Mozart, or maybe one of the B's. Given my druthers, he'd've stayed and played, and the other passenger would've gone over the side. As soon as he'd gone, though, The Other Passenger approached with a sort of ducking and bobbing movement, like a stray dog wanting to make friends. There was no way I could pretend not to notice him, so I made a show of pausing in the insertion of my earbook and let him introduce himself as Ellis something or something Ellis (he mumbled), tell me his specialty (something botanical), and make a joke appropriate to our situation (never mind). I replied in kind, skipping only the joke. It really was like feeding a stray dog: he brightened appreciably and stopped mumbling. He said, "I found the propelling idea for my own line of research in one of Kelly's early monographs."

"Whose?"

"Ivan Kelly. He did a lot of pioneering work here on the evolution of soil and the part mid-Paleozoic terrestrial organisms played in the transformation of sterile regolith into real soil."

"Oh," I said blankly, "him."

"But Kelly also got stranded far inland once and had to eat whatever he could find for a few days. You know, primitive plants and invertebrates. I want to prove that people could live off the land here indefinitely if they had to." I gave him my best look of mild disapproval. "It's not just the thought of eating slime and bugs. I'm a surveyor, not an ecologist, but even I know this is a delicate ecosphere. I don't think people should be making a real effort to find out what there is to eat here."

"There're already things here eating each other and the plants."

"Take it from a guy who's seen bulldozers mow down forests and mountains in an afternoon. Human beings always end up taking bigger bites than anything else."

"I know. That's why, back in our own time, the world isn't any too homelike anymore. People've made it so. The day will come, though, when a few people here decide not to go back. A few determined, resourceful people could live here."

"I don't think anybody could survive here very long. There's no wood for fire or tools. No soil to grow crops in."

"You'd hardly need tools."

"Yeah, not if all you wanted was to eke out an existence as a hunter-gatherer. If you were willing to jettison all the trappings of civilization."

He dared to sneer slightly, and when I didn't immediately assault him, he broadened it. "You mean like computers, television, government?"

"I mean books, music, art, and science and technology."

"Maybe the kind of people I have in mind wouldn't want all those things. Maybe they'd know better this time. They could make this into a very different Earth."

"This is already a very different Earth."

He'd come a good way from mumbling in just a few short minutes; now he spoke with an intensity I had to begin to find creepy. I decided to cut the conversation short and remarked that I really was hopelessly behind in my work and without further adieu stuck in the earbook. It was actually a novel, but he couldn't know. He nodded, backed away, retreated to the stem, where he made a show of admiring the scenery. The Paleozoic landscape is a very nearly bare stage, with a thin fuzz of greenery along its edges. It looks as unpromising as a teenager's first mustache. There's nothing like it to make you mix your metaphors.

But if there hadn't been much to look at while the boat was moving, there was even less now that it had stopped. Ellis must have debated with himself for all of five or six minutes before deciding that I was a lesser evil than boredom. When I saw him start to sidle forward again, I pointedly gazed off into the middle distance and looked rapt. He moved by me and went to the bow, as though that was where he'd been intending to go anyway, and pretended to admire the scenery from that end of the boat.

The sun climbed down the sky. Doug emerged from belowdecks, with so much machine gunk on him he resembled an old-time minstrel, and told us, "Guess we'll be spending the night here."

I asked, "Can't you call Stinktown for help?"

"I could, but I'm a civilian contractor, and I have my reputation to consider."

"Like your boat breaking down in the middle of nowhere won't affect your reputation."

He smiled tightly. "I can fix the engine, but it's gonna take a while longer."

He held up his grimy hands. "Either one of you feel like cooking dinner?"

I looked at Ellis and shrugged and said, "I' cook." You spend any time in the field, you better know how to fix dinner. But I quickly added, "This once."

Ellis shrugged in turn, trying to look casual. "I'll cook tomorrow."

Doug said, "Okay, good," and went below again.

I went below, too, to the tiny galley. The stores were the usual desiccated stuff, but I flung together this and that and called it an onion souffle, and Doug, at least, seemed willing to give me the benefit of the doubt once we'd crammed ourselves into the eating area. He'd evidently immersed himself in solvent, because he came to dinner looking spotless and smelling faintly, not unpleasantly, of chemicals.

When he had cleaned his plate, Ellis said to Doug, "Are we going to be here very long tomorrow?"

"As long as it takes."

"Then I want to look around. There's an ideal spot at that bend ahead. That bank's bound to have submerged hollows, perfect hideouts."

"Hideouts for what?"

"Fish."

Doug looked just about as incredulous as I felt.

"Be right back," said Ellis, and bolted from the table. He returned dragging, I swear, fishing tackle, which he unloaded untidily in our midst. "First let me show you my rod."

"Not on your life," I said, but he went ahead and showed off his rod, and his net, and the works. "I can't believe you used your personal baggage allowance for this junk."

"I'm one of those rare individuals who's truly able to combine pleasure and research."

"What pleasure?"

"Everyone must have their pastimes."

"I agree. That's why I brought lots of music and long, dense nineteenth-century novels. You can listen to music and read practically anywhere. Fishing, though."

"You don't fish?"

"I was born and raised in a Kansas wheat field."

"So you don't know the first thing about fishing."

That struck me as serious talk from someone I was becoming more and more convinced didn't know the first thing about anything. "The idea's to get the fish on the hook, is it not?"

"Ostensibly," Doug cut in. I looked at him in surprise; he lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. "Definitely, if you're fishing for your supper. I like fishing, too. Or I did, back home. You sometimes fish simply to be at peace with everything."

"Everything except the fish, I guess."

"I bear the fish no malice. Unless I was hungry, I always released the ones I caught. I enjoy fishing for the sake of fishing."

"I see. It's a zen exercise."

We had been ignoring Ellis. "Here and now," he cut in resentfully, "I'm going to catch fish for food and study." He opened a leather case, and its contents lay gleaming in the light from the overhead. "I made all of these lures myself, to experiment with." He pointed to some nasty-looking bare barbs.

"Those're just for raw bait, of course, for fish that hunt by smell or taste. But these--" he indicated several colorful tied flies "-- are designed to attract those that hunt by sight. And this --" a bullet-like thing "-- is for fish that hunt by sound."

"Fish don't have ears."

"They have vibration sensor organs." He motioned for me to hold out my hand, then picked up the bullet-like thing, gave it a twist, and dropped it into my palm, where it lay humming and tickling insistently.

"My ex traded me in for one of these," I said, "only larger."

Doug had been regarding Ellis's battery of lures with undisguised skepticism. Now he said, "I hate to be the one to have to tell you, but there isn't a fish on Earth now with the physical or mental equipment to snap at one of your lures."

"I guess we'll find out if that's true."

I said, "I've heard reports -- no, maybe they're only rumors -- something, anyhow, about freshwater sharks."

"Pseudosharklets," Doug said, "little things, about as long as your hand. They have jaws, and they eat invertebrates."

"Wouldn't be much sport in catching a fish that tiny."

"The sport," Doug said, "is in standing hip-deep in muddy water for hours."

"Very relaxing, I'm sure."

Once again we were ignoring Ellis. "Well," he announced, "I have a more serious purpose than sport. I am, as the saying goes, after bigger fish."

"Read my lips," Doug said. "There are no big fish here. If you pull anything bigger than my hand out of this creek or any other body of water here in the Paleozoic, I'll eat it."

"Good!"

I didn't like the way he said that. Not at all.

"I've been thinking a lot lately," he went on, "that everybody could use a change from the same old foodstuffs."

Doug looked at him suspiciously. "What's wrong with the same old foodstuffs? We've got all my favorites."

Ellis wrinkled his nose. "Dried vegetables, rice, oatmeal, and the ever-popular meat bar. While, mathematically speaking, the number of possible combinations is astronomical, the practical combinations are limited. I've been experimenting."

Doug shook his head. "Don't like the sound of that word, experiment. Don't like it at all."

I nodded agreement. "Not where food's concerned."

"Hear me out. I volunteer to do lunch if you'll give me a free hand."

"Hell, no," Doug said.

"What he said," I said.

Ellis was clearly disappointed. "I don't get it. I bet, ordinarily, back home, you guys'd eat almost anything. Stale pizza, undermicrowaved frozen food."

"We knew what that stuff was," said Doug.

"You're as bad as little kids."

"There's also the matter of nutrition," I said. "What about vitamins and minerals? Protein?"

"Well, that's part of my project, too. I'm on the lookout for esculent Paleozoic organisms."

"What kind?" Doug asked.

"Suitable for use as human food. This is not off-the-wall stuff. It isn't just paleobiological research I'm interested in. I've always been fascinated by the history of food. I've always wondered who figured out things like how to make bread or what you had to do to an olive to make it edible."

"How about who figured out how to turn a cow into a meat bar?"

Ellis pretended I hadn't spoken. "And fugu! What about fugu? Who figured out which part of the blowfish is edible and which part'll kill you dead?"

"Maybe people in some Japanese fishing village," Doug said. "Blowfish was all they could catch that week, and they were starving."

"Well, even if they were, you'd think as soon as the first couple of people keeled over dead --"

"Well, maybe it was some Japanese nobleman who just rounded up a bunch of peasants and told'em, Each of you eat part of this blowfish, I want to see what happens. What're they gonna do? The choice's between maybe being poisoned if they comply or definitely getting their heads lopped off if they don't."

"Well, be that as it may," Ellis said, "I propose to see what I can do with the materials available locally. Back at Stinktown, I sampled the fish, shellfish, seaweeds. Here --"

"Yuck," said Doug, "seaweed!"

"It's the same stuff you find wrapped around sushi --"

"Yuck," said Doug, "sushi," but Ellis kept right on talking.

-- or it's its ancestor, anyway."

"How can you be sure," I asked, "those things aren't all loaded with defensive toxins? Or that one of those ugly little fish isn't the Paleozoic equivalent of fugu. You want to poison yourself, don't let anybody stop you. But don't be wanting to poison everyone else with you."

"I've devised a few simple tests to determine the presence of toxins. However, this is not a sophisticated biota, relative to what we know back in our own time. In four hundred million years, land plants will have evolved all sorts of chemical defenses against parasites and things. The little stems we see here, though, they're just barely plants as it is. They don't even have roots. They haven't evolved the complex range of chemical defenses their descendants need because there isn't the horde of parasites here."

"Doesn't mean that some preadapted sprig couldn't put us all in our graves," Doug said. "It doesn't even have to kill us, it might just give us the runs."

"I want to give it a try, all the same. I promise you that I shall never set anything before you that I haven't subjected to rigorous chemical analysis."

Ellis looked from Doug to me and back. "Come on. In the spirit of scientific inquiry. Look, don't say yes or no now, sleep on it." He gathered up his junk, somehow without putting out anyone's eye, and left us sitting.

"Don't know about you," Doug said, "but I'm not inclined to be one of his guinea pigs."

"Think I'll pass, too." I put my tongue between my molars for a second.

"Still, he's got a point, hasn't he? The knowledge of what's edible and what's not might come in handy. Survival in the wilderness and all that. What if our boat were to break down in the middle of nowhere?"

"Oh," said Doug, "that's funny. Ha, ha." His pocket beeper went off. "That's for the radio. Must be a weather report." He worked himself free and rose from the table. Over his shoulder, he let me have it between the eyes with one last Ha.

THE NIGHT was no cooler than the day. The three of us spread pallets on deck, and Ellis tried to launch us into conversation again, but Doug told him to shut up and go to sleep. Their voices were the only sounds under the black

starshot Paleozoic sky; the exchange was jarring. I tossed and writhed and don't remember sleeping at all, though at one point I noticed that the moon had suddenly changed position. Then -- again, suddenly I heard the engine turning over. I opened my eyes and saw the sun hovering its own diameter above the eastern horizon. The engine stopped. I sat up and looked around. I was alone on deck. Doug was in the galley, brewing coffee and mixing oatmeal and dried fruit. "Engines fixed," he said as he handed me a cup.

"Then we can be on our merry way."

"Not just yet."

"Christ. What's the problem now?"

"There's still something I've got to take care of."

I looked around. "Where's Ellis?"

"Said he was going grocery shopping."

"Uh oh."

"Do me a favor, help me keep an eye on Nature Boy this morning, will you?"

I sat down heavily. "He's really a flake, isn't he?"

"You -- we probably don't know the half of it."

"Did he take all that ridiculous fishing gear with him?"

"Nope. Just a net and a couple of plastic buckets. Anyway, we don't want him wandering off or getting hurt."

"We don't?"

"Have some oatmeal."

After breakfast, I went up on deck. At first there was no sign of Ellis, but then I saw him wading well upstream; every now and then he'd bend down, reach into the water, and put something into one of the buckets. My first impulse was to yell at him to get out of the goddamn water. Then I thought, So what if a eurypterid does get him? Eurypterid is Greek, or maybe it's Latin, for "big ugly water bug with an attitude."

No such luck, though. I tired of waiting to see him pulled under and plugged in my earbook and went back to *The Way of All Flesh*. Thus far, it had gone kind of like an Anthony Trollope novel with bamboo splints shoved under its fingernails w Samuel Butler suffered from no deficiency of bile -- but now it had a somehow soothing effect. I found myself enjoying it even more, Ellis having provided me with a face for Butler's unlovable main character.

Doug came on deck after a while and busied himself checking the crates lashed amidships, then went into the wheelhouse, came back out, went below, came back up, went back into his wheelhouse, fiddled with the radio, came back out, etc. I hadn't figured him for the anxious type, but you just never know; if anyone had a right to be antsy, it was me. He kept looking downriver, in the direction of Stinktown, and checking his wristwatch, too. Finally I called to him, "Don't worry, I've had my eye on him the whole time, he's right over yonder," and pointed to Ellis. Doug glanced in that direction and nodded to me, but he made no attempt to summon Ellis, just went into a new cycle of repetitions, wheelhouse, deck, look around, check the time.

The morning wore on. Ellis returned lugging his now-filled buckets and went straight down into the galley. A little before noon, he reemerged and proudly announced that luncheon was served.

I took my time getting up, and Doug, whom I could see in the wheelhouse, hesitated as well before bestirring himself. Down in the galley, Ellis set steaming plates before us.

"What is it," I asked, "creamed spinach?"

"Of course not. The green stuff's a water plant."

"I'm not eating pond scum," Doug said.

"It's not pond scum. The pink strips're fish." Ellis looked at me smugly.

"Protein, you know."

Doug said, "I'm not eating this stuff, whatever it is." He pushed the plate away, reached around to grab things out of the food locker, and stuck a slice of meat bar between two crackers.

"Come on," Ellis implored me, "just taste it. Look," and he conveyed some green slime from his own plate to his mouth. I watched carefully to see that

he swallowed. "Quite tasty, really."

"That trick didn't work for my mom, it sure's hell won't work for you."

"Do it for science."

I muttered a curse under my breath and picked up my fork. Doug smirked at me around his mouthful of meat bar sandwich. The green stuff tasted a little like turnip greens; Ellis had used a lot of vinegar and tossed in dried shallots, too, which I thought was cheating. I resisted the impulse to ask if Ivan Kelly had just happened to have condiments on him that time he'd got lost in the wilderness.

Instead, I gingerly sampled the fish, and after chewing and swallowing, I said, "Tastes like anchovies, only saltier, oilier. Fishier."

"Nonsense," Ellis said happily. "It's an estuarine fish -- the Paleozoic equivalent of catfish."

Picking at my food, I inexorably reduced the volume on my plate. Ellis ate with unabashed gusto. He had finished two big helpings by the time I was down to my last couple of bites. Doug washed down his repast with a beer and left after favoring me with another smirk; to Ellis he said only, "Cook cleans up."

Ellis gave me a big smile, revealing a bit of green stuff stuck on an eyetooth. "Finish up," he said, "there's dessert!"

I draw a merciful veil of silence over what followed.

Afterward, I left him in the galley and went on deck. Doug was leaning against the wheelhouse, looking off downriver. "You waiting for a tow?" I said, but he only shook his head. I tried to take up my novel where I'd left off. Ellis appeared after a time and approached me, smiling. The bit of green stuff was still stuck to his smile.

"Well," he said, "was Kelly onto something, or wasn't he?"

I cut off Samuel Butler in mid-tirade and said, "Yes, Kelly was a genius. And you are truly worthy to take up his mantle. Forgive me for having ever doubted it."

"I just meant -- since you obviously weren't completely revolted --"

His face had fallen slightly, and in spite of myself I felt I owed him something. "No, I wasn't revolted. In fact, I did manage to clean my plate, so I guess compliments are due to the chef. My compliments, chef. A word of friendly advice, though. Don't go into the catering business when you get back home."

"Okay, so I admit it isn't fun food. The point is, you now know you could survive here if you had to -- live off the land."

I thought that was still pretty arguable, but all I said was, "Well, let's hope I never have to."

"What's that?"

I became aware, all at once, of a faint drumming sound. It quickly grew louder and resolved itself into the beating of helicopter blades, and I turned to see a Navy machine approaching us -- low and fast, purposefully, like a barracuda -- from the direction of Stinktown. Ellis saw it at the same moment. He looked stunned. Then he screamed, "Goddammit!" and leaped over the side of the boat. He flailed through the shallow water and scrambled, muddy and trailing algal filaments, onto the bank. He ran a short distance in one direction, then in another, paused to look up at the helicopter, ran several more yards in several more different directions. The helicopter settled to within a foot of the ground, and three bluejackets jumped out and quickly closed on him. Ellis ran in a circle, then stopped suddenly and plopped down on the ground. Even at that distance I could see that he was crying like a baby. The bluejackets scooped him up, not ungently, and half-led, half-dragged him toward the helicopter. Crouching in the door of the helicopter was a young Navy officer and another man, a civilian I vaguely recalled from Stinktown. The bluejackets loaded Ellis into the helicopter, the civilian patted him reassuringly on the arm, then looked our way, smiled, gave us the thumbs-up. I looked around to see Doug acknowledge with a wave, though he wasn't returning the smile. The helicopter rose, turned, pointed itself, and flew away, back toward

Stinktown.

I watched until the machine had dwindled to a dot, then went over to Doug and demanded, "Now what the hell was that all about?"

"Ellis was supposed to go home with the rest of his group day before yesterday. He told me he was going upriver to do field work. I thought he was traveling sort of light, but he'd done a good job of faking his authorizations. Anyway, they turned the camp inside out looking for him, climbed all over the headlands. They were about to start dragging the marsh when somebody thought to send out an A.P.B. I got it after dinner last night and radioed back I'd wait here until they came to collect him."

"So he was really going to go off into the wilderness and try to live on slime and bugs." I spread my hands in a gesture of disbelief. "Isn't screening supposed to keep lunatics out of Paleozoic time?"

"Just the obvious ones."

"How obvious do they have to be?" He had no answer for that, so I said, "Well, you might at least've told them to come get him before I had to eat goddamn pond scum for lunch."

"'S what you get," he said as he turned to go into the wheelhouse, "for making fun of my boatmanship."

Far inland, the river separates into its tributaries. Bands of color mark some of the confluences; the waters rushing down from ancient highlands are relatively clear, those meandering across the peneplain are turbid and brown. And wouldn't you know it, we ran aground on a sand bar Doug swore hadn't been there the trip before. He said he could rock us off, but it would take a little while.

Strangely calm, I nodded and glanced up at the sky. It was almost noon. "While you're rocking," I said, "why don't I whip us up some lunch."

He nodded absently. "Good idea. You know where everything is."

"Yep, pretty much."

I went to the galley and tossed all of Doug's meat bars through a porthole. Then I went looking for Ellis's net and buckets.