

Janet Kagan

Mirabile



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by Janet Kagan

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For MARY MEGSON,

who read me sf before I was old enough to read,

for FRED MEGSON,

who let me tell every other chapter of the bedtime cliff-hanger,

for SUSAN CASPER,

who knows why this particular book got written,

and for RICKY,

of course and as always...

May they never stop scandalizing the kids!

CONTENTS

- The Loch Moose Monster
- The Return of the Kangaroo Rex
- The Flowering Inferno
- Getting the Bugs Out
- Raising Cane
- Frankenswine
- Author's Note

The Loch Moose Monster



THIS YEAR the Ribeiro's daffodils seeded early and they seeded cockroaches. Now, ecologically speaking, even a cockroach has its place—but these suckers *bit*. That didn't sound Earth-authentic to me. Not that I care, mind you, all I ask is useful. I wasn't betting on that either.

As usual, we were shorthanded—most of the team was up-country trying to stabilize a herd of Guernseys—which left me and Mike to throw a containment tent around the Ribeiro place while we did the gene-reads on the roaches and the daffodils that spawned 'em. Dragon's Teeth, sure enough, and worse than useless. I grabbed my gear and went in to clean them out, daffodils and all.

By the time I crawled back out of the containment tent, exhausted, cranky, and thoroughly bitten, there wasn't a daffodil left in town. Damn fools. If I'd told 'em the roaches were Earth-authentic they'd have cheered 'em, no matter how obnoxious they were.

I didn't even have the good grace to say hi to Mike when I slammed into the lab. The first thing out of my mouth was, "The red daffodils—in front of Sagdeev's."

"I got 'em," he said. "Nick of time, but I got 'em. They're in the greenhouse—"

We'd done a gene-read on that particular patch of daffodils the first year they'd flowered red: they promised to produce a good strain of praying mantises, probably Earth-authentic. We both knew how badly Mirabile needed insectivores. The other possibility was something harmless but pretty that ships' records called "fireflies." Either would have been welcome, and those idiots had been ready to consign both to a fire.

"I used the same soil, Annie, so don't give me that look."

"Town's full of fools," I growled, to let him know that look wasn't aimed at him. "Same soil, fine, but can we match the rest of the environmental conditions those praying mantises need in the goddamn greenhouse?"

"It's the best we've got," he said. He shrugged and his right hand came up bandaged. I glared at it.

He dropped the bandaged hand behind the lab bench. "They were gonna burn 'em. I couldn't—" He looked away, looked back. "Annie, it's nothing to worry about—"

I'd have done the same myself, true, but that was no reason to let *him* get into the habit of taking fool risks.

I started across to check out his hand and give him pure hell from close up. Halfway there the console blatted for attention. Yellow light on the console, meaning it was no emergency, but I snatched it up and dealt with the interruption before I dealt with Mike. I snapped a "Yeah?" at the screen.

"Mama Jason?"

Nobody calls me that but Elly's kids. I glowered at the face on screen: my age, third-generation Mirabilan, and not so privileged. "Annie Jason Masmajeau," I corrected, "Who wants to know?"

"Leonov Bellmaker Denness at this end," he said. "I apologize for my improper use of your nickname." Ship's manners—he ignored my rudeness completely.

The name struck me as vaguely familiar but I was in no mood to search my memory; I'd lost my

ship's manners about three hours into the cockroach clean-out. "State your business," I said.

To his credit, he did: "Two of Elly's lodgers claim there's a monster in Loch Moose. By their description, it's a humdinger."

I was all ears now. Elly runs the lodge at Loch Moose for fun—her profession's raising kids. (Elly Raiser Roget, like her father before her. Our population is still so small we can't afford to lose genes just because somebody's not suited, one way or another, for parenting.) A chimera anywhere near Loch Moose was a potential disaster. Thing of it was, Denness didn't sound right for that. "Then why aren't *they* making this call?"

He gave a deep-throated chuckle. "They're in the dining room gorging themselves on Chris's shrimp. I doubt they'll make you a formal call when they're done. Their names are Emile Pilot Stirzaker and Francois Cobbler Pastides and, right now, they can't spell either without dropping letters."

So he thought they'd both been smoking dumbweed. Fair enough. I simmered down and reconsidered him. I'd've bet money he was the one who sidetracked Pastides and Stirzaker into the eating binge.

Recognition struck at last: this was the guy Elly's kids called "Noisy." The first thing he'd done on moving into the neighborhood was shout every one of 'em in one helluva contest. He was equally legendary for his stories, his bells, and his ability to keep secrets. I hadn't met him, but I'd sure as hell heard tell.

I must have said the nickname aloud, because Denness said, "Yes, 'Noisy.' Is that enough to get me a hearing?"

"It is." It was my turn to apologize. "Sorry. What more do you want me to hear?"

"You should, I think, hear Stirzaker imitate his monster's bellow of rage."

It took me a long moment to get his drift, but get it I did. "I'm on my way," I said. I snapped off and started repacking my gear.

Mike stared at me. "Annie? What did I miss?"

"You ever know anybody who got auditory hallucinations on dumbweed?"

"Shit," he said. "No." He scrambled for his own pack.

"Not you," I said. "I need you here to coddle those daffodils, check the environmental conditions that produced 'em, and call me if Dragon's Teeth pop up anywhere else." I shouldered my pack and finished with a glare and a growl: "That should be enough to keep you out of bonfires while I'm gone, shouldn't it?"

BY THE TIME I grounded in the clearing next to Elly's lodge, I'd decided I was on a wild moose chase. Yeah, I know the Earth-authentic is wild *goose*, but "wild moose" was Granddaddy Jason's phrase. He'd known Jason—the original first generation Jason—well before the Dragon's Teeth had started popping up.

One look at the wilderness where Elly's lodge is now and Jason knew she had the perfect EC for moose. She hauled the embryos out of ships' storage and set them thawing. Built up a nice little herd of the things and turned 'em loose. Not a one of them survived—damn foolish creatures died of a taste for a Mirabilan plant they couldn't metabolize.

Trying to establish a viable herd got to be an obsession with Jason. She must've spent years at it, off and on. She never succeeded but somebody with a warped sense of humor named the lake Loch

Moose and it stuck, moose or no moose.

Loch Moose looked as serene as it always did this time of year. The water lilies were in full bloom—patches of velvety red and green against the sparkles of sunlight off the water. Here and there I saw a ripple of real trout, Earth-authentic.

On the bank to the far right, Susan's troop of otters played tag, skidding down the incline and hitting the water with a splash. They whistled encouragement to each other like a pack of fans at a ballgame. Never saw a creature have more pure *fun* than an otter—unless it was a dozen otters, like now.

The pines were that dusty gold that meant I'd timed it just right to see Loch Moose smoke. There's nothing quite so beautiful as that drift of pollen fog across the loch. It would gild rocks and trees alike until the next rainfall.

Monster, my ass—but where better for a wild moose chase?

I clambered down the steps to Elly's lodge, still gawking at the scenery, so I was totally unprepared for the EC in the lobby. If that bright-eyed geneticist back on Earth put the double whammy on any of the human genes in the cold banks they sent along (swore they hadn't, but after the kangaroo rex, damnify believe anything the old records tell me), the pandemonium I found would have been enough to kick off Dragon's Teeth by the dozens.

Amid the chaos, Ilanith, Elly's next-to-oldest-not-yet-grown, was handling the oversized gilt ledger with great dignity. She lit up when she saw me and waved. Then she bent down for whispered conversation. A second later Jen, the nine-year-old, exploded from behind the desk, bellowing, "Elleeeeeee! Noiseeeeee! Come quick! Mama Jason's here!" The kid's lung power cut right through the chaos and startled the room into a momentary hush. She charged through the door to the dining room still trying to shout the house down.

I took advantage of the distraction to elbow my way to the desk and Ilanith.

She squinted a little at me, purely Elly in manner, and said, "Bet you got hopped on by a kangaroo rex this week. You're *real* snarly."

"Can't do anything about my face," I told her. "And it was biting cockroaches." I pushed up a sleeve to show her the bites.

"Bleeeeeeh," she said, with an inch or two of tongue for emphasis. "I hope they weren't keepers."

"Just the six I saved to put in your bed. Wouldn't want you to think I'd forgotten you."

She wrinkled her nose at me and flung herself across the desk to plant a big sloppy kiss on my cheek. "Mama Jason, you are the world's biggest tease. But I'm gonna give you your favorite room anyhow"—she wrinkled her nose in a very different fashion at the couple to my right—"since *those two* just checked out of it."

One of the *those two* peered at me like a myopic crane. I saw recognition strike, then he said, "We've changed our minds. We'll keep the room."

"Too late," said Ilanith—and she was smug about it. "But, if you want to stay, I can give you one on the other side of the lodge. No view." Score one for the good guys, I thought.

"See, Elly?" It was Jen, back at a trot beside Elly and dragging Noisy behind her. "See?" Jen said again. "If Mama Jason's here, I won't have to go away, right?"

"Right," I said.

“Oh, Jen!” Elly dropped to one knee to pull Jen into one of her full-body-check hugs. “Is *that* what’s been worrying you? Leo already explained to your mom. There’s no monster. Nobody’s going to send you away from Loch Moose!”

Jen, who’d been looking relieved, suddenly looked suspicious. “If there’s no monster, why’s Mama Jason here?”

“Need a break,” I said, realizing I meant it. Seeing Elly and the kids was break enough all by itself. “Stomped enough Dragon’s Teeth this week. I’m not about to go running after monsters that vanish at the first breath of fresh air.”

Elly gave me a smile that would have thawed a glacier and my shoulders relaxed for the first time in what seemed like months.

I grinned back. “Have your two monster-sighters sobered up yet?”

“Sobered up,” reported Ilanith, “and checked out.” She giggled. “You should have seen how red-faced they were, Mama Jason.”

I glowered at no one in particular. “Just as well. After the day I had, they’d have been twice as red if I’d had to deal with ’em.”

Elly rose to her feet, bringing Jen with her. The two of them looked me over, Jen imitating Elly’s keen-eyed inspection. “We’d better get Mama Jason to her room. She needs a shower and a nap worse than any kid in the household.”

Ilanith shook her head. “Let her eat first, Elly. By the time she’s done, we’ll have her room ready.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said, “if the kids waiting tables can take it.”

“We raise a sturdy bunch around here. Go eat, Annie.” Elly gave me a kiss on the cheek—I got a bonus kiss from Jen—and the two of them bustled off to get my room ready. I frowned after them: Jen still seemed worried and I wondered why.

Ilanith rounded the desk to grab my pack. Standing between me and Leo, she suddenly jammed her fists into her hips. “Oh, nuts. Ship’s manners. Honestly, Mama Jason—how did people *ever* get acquainted in the old days?” With an expression of tried patience, she formally introduced the two of us.

I looked him over, this time giving him a fair shake. The face was as good as the reputation, all laugh lines etched deep. In return, I got inspected just as hard.

When nobody said anything for a full half second, Ilanith said, “More? You need more? Didn’t I get it right?”

Leo gave a smile that was a match for Elly’s. Definitely the EC, I thought. Then he thrust out a huge welcoming hand and said, “That’s Leo to you, as I don’t imagine I could outshout you.”

That assessment visibly impressed Ilanith.

“Annie,” I said. I took the hand. Not many people have hands the size of mine. In Denness I’d met my match for once. Surprised me how good that felt. He didn’t let go immediately and I wasn’t all that anxious for him to do so.

Ilanith eyed him severely. “Leo, there’s no need to be grabby!” She tapped his hand, trying to make him let go.

“Shows how much you know about ship’s manners,” Leo said. “I was about to offer the lady my arm, to escort her into the dining room.”

“Perfectly good old-time ritual,” I said. “I can stand it if he can.”

Leo held out his arm, ship’s formal; I took it. We went off rather grandly, leaving Ilanith all the more suspicious that we’d made it up for her benefit.

Leo chuckled as we passed beyond her earshot. “She won’t believe that until she double-checks with Elly.”

“I know. Good for ’em—check it out for yourself, I always say. Have *you* heard any bellowing off the loch?”

“Yes,” he said, “I have heard a couple of unusual sounds off the loch lately. I’ve no way of knowing if they’re all made by the same creature. But I’ve lived here long enough to know that these are new. One is a kind of sucking gurgle. Then there’s something related to a cow’s lowing”—he held up a hand—“*not* cow and *not* red deer either. I know both. And there’s a bellow that’ll bring you out a sound sleep faster than a shotgun blast.”

His lips flattened a bit. “I can’t vouch for that one. I’ve *only* heard it awakening from sleep. It might have been a dream, but it never *feels* like dream—and the bellow Stirzaker gave was a fair approximation of it.”

The lines across his forehead deepened. “There’s something else you should know, Annie. Jen’s been acting spooked, and neither Elly nor I can make any sense of it.”

“I saw. I thought she was still keyed up over the monster business.”

He shook his head. “This started weeks ago, long before Stirzaker and Pastides got everybody stirred up. ”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Anything I can do to help,” he said. He swung his free hand to tell me how extensive that “anything” actually was. “On either count. ”

“Right now, you watch me eat a big plate of *my* shrimp with Chris’s barbecue sauce on ’em.”

Loch Moose was the only source of freshwater shrimp on Mirabile, and they were one of my triumphs. Not just the way they tasted when Chris got done with them, but because I’d brought the water lilies they came from myself and planted them down in Loch Moose on the chance they’d throw off something good. Spent three years making sure they stabilized. Got some pretty dragonflies out of that redundancy, too. Elly’s kids use ’em for catching rock lobsters, which is another thing Chris cooks to perfection.

By the time I’d finished my shrimp, the dining room was empty except for a couple of people I knew to be locals like Leo. I blinked my surprise, I guess.

Leo said, “Most of the guests checked out this morning. Let’s take advantage of it.” He picked up my glass and his own and bowed me toward one of the empty booths.

I followed and sank, sighing, into overstuffed comfort. “Now,” I said, “tell me what you heard from Stirzaker and Pastides.”

He obliged in detail, playing both roles. When he was done, I appreciated his reputation for story telling, but I knew as well he’d given me an accurate account, right down to the two of them tripping over each other’s words in their excitement.

Their description of the chimera would have scared the daylights out of me— if they’d been able agree on any given part of it aside from the size. Stirzaker had seen the thing reach for him with two

great clawlike hands. Pastides had seen the loops of a water snake, grown to unbelievable lengths, undulate past him. They agreed again only when it came to the creature's bellow.

When all was said, I had to laugh. "I bet *their* granddaddy told *them* scary bedtime stories too!"

"Good God," said Leo, grinning suddenly. "The Loch Ness monster! I should have recognized it!"

"From which description?" I grinned back. Luckily the question didn't require an answer.

"Mama Jason!"

That was all the warning I got. Susan—all hundred pounds of her—pounced into my lap.

"They were dumbstruck, both of them," she said, her manner making it clear that this was the most important news of the century. "You should have seen them eat! Tell her, Noisy—you saw!"

"Hello to you too," I said, "and I just got the full story, complete with sound effects."

That settled her down a bit, but not much. At sixteen, nothing settles them down. Sliding into the seat beside me, she said, "Now you tell—about the biting cockroaches."

Well, I'd have had to tell that one sooner or later, so I told it for two, ending with Mike's heroic attempt to rescue the red daffodils.

Susan's eyes went dreamy. "Fireflies," she said. "Think how pretty they'd be around the lake at night!"

"I was," I said, all too curtly. "Sorry," I amended, "I'm still pissed off about them."

"I've got another one for you," Susan said, matching my scowl. "Rowena who lives about twenty miles that way"—she pointed, glanced at Leo (who nudged her finger about 5 degrees left), then went on—"that way, claims that the only way to keep from raising Dragon's Teeth is to spit tobacco on your plants whenever you go past them." She gave another glance at Leo, this one a different sort of query. "I think she *believes* that. I know she *does* it!"

"Fraid so," Leo said.

"Well, we'll know just what EC to check when something unusual pops out of Rowena's plants, won't we?" I sighed. The superstitions really were adding to our problems.

"Mama Jason," said Susan—with a look that accused me of making a joke much too low for her age level—"How many authentic species need tobacco-spit ECs to pop up?"

"No joke, honey. It's not authentic species I'd expect under conditions like that. It'd be Dragon's Teeth plain and probably not so simple." I looked from one to the other. "Keep an eye on those plants for me. Anything suddenly flowers in a different color or a slightly different form, snag a sample and send it to me fast!"

They nodded, Susan looking pleased with the assignment, Leo slightly puzzled. At last Leo said, "I'm afraid I've never understood this business of Dragon's Teeth..." He broke off, suddenly embarrassed.

"Fine," I said, "as long as you don't spit tobacco on the ragweed or piss on the petunias or toss the soapy wash water on the lettuce patch."

Susan eyed me askance. I said, "Last year the whole town of Misty Valley decided that pissing on the petunias was the only way to stabilize them." I threw up my hands to stave off the question that was already on the tip of Susan's tongue. "I don't know how that got started, so don't ask me. I'm not even sure I *want* to know! The end result, of course, was that the petunias seeded ladybugs."

"Authentic?" Susan asked.

“No, but close enough to be valuable. Nice little insectivores and surprisingly well-suited for doing in ragmites.” ~~The ragmites are native and a bloody nuisance.~~ “And before you ask,” I added, “the things they *might* have gotten in the same EC included a very nasty species of poisonous ant and two different grain-eaters, one of which would chain up to a salamander with a taste for quail eggs.”

“Oh, my!” said Susan. “Misty Valley’s where we get our quail eggs!”

“So does everybody on Mirabile,” I said. “Nobody’s gotten the quail to thrive anywhere else yet.” For Leo’s benefit, I added, “So many of our Earth-authentic species are on rocky ground, we can’t afford to lose a lot of individuals to a Dragon’s Tooth.”

Leo still looked puzzled. After a moment, he shook his head. “I’ve never understood this business. Maybe for once I could get a simple explanation, suitable for a bellmaker...?”

I gestured to Susan. “My assistant will be glad to give you the short course.”

Susan gave one of those award-winning grins. “It goes all the way back to before we left Earth, Leo.” Leo arched an eyebrow: “‘We’?” Susan punched him—lightly—on the arm and said, “You know what I mean! Humans!”

She heaved a dramatic sigh and went on in spite of it all. “They wanted to make sure we’d have everything we might possibly need.”

“I thought that’s why they sent along the embryo and gene banks,” Leo said.

Susan nodded. “It was. But at the time there was a fad for redundancy—every system doubled, tripled, even quadrupled—so just to make *sure* we couldn’t lose a species we might need, they built that redundancy into the gene pool too.”

She glanced at me. She was doing fine, so I nodded for her to go on.

“Look, Noisy. They took the genes for, say, sunflowers and they tucked ’em into a twist in wheat helices. Purely recessive, but when the environmental conditions are right, maybe one one-hundredth of your wheat seeds will turn out to sprout sunflowers.”

She leaned closer, all earnestness. “And one one-hundredth of the sunflowers, given the right EC, will seed bumblebees, and so on and so forth. That’s what Mama Jason calls ‘chaining up.’ Eventually you might get red deer.”

Leo frowned. “I don’t see how you can go from plant to animal...”

“There’s usually an intermediate stage—a plant that comes out all wrong for that plant but perfect for an incubator for whatever’s in the next twist.” She paused dramatically, then finished, “As you can see, it was a perfectly *dumb* idea.”

I decided to add my two bits here. “The *idea* wasn’t as dumb as you make out, kiddo. They just hadn’t worked the bugs out before they stuck us with it.”

“When she says *bugs*,” Susan confided grimly to Leo, “she *means* Dragon’s Teeth.”

I stepped in again. “Two things went wrong, Leo. First, there was supposed to be an easy way to turn anything other than the primary helix off and on at will. The problem is that information was in the chunk of ships’ records we lost, and it was such new knowledge at the time that it didn’t get passed to anyone on the ship.

“The second problem was the result of pure goof. They forgot that, in the long run, all plants and animals change to suit their environment. A new mutation may be just the thing for our wheat, but who knows what it’s done to those hidden sunflowers? Those—and the chimerae—are the real

Dragon's Teeth."

Leo turned to Susan. "Want to explain the chimerae as long as you're at it?"

"A chimera is something that's, well, sort of patched together from two, maybe three, different genetic sources. Ordinarily it's nothing striking—you'd probably only notice if you did a full gene-read. But with all those hidden sets of genes, just about anything can happen."

"Kangaroo rex, for example," I said. "That one was a true chimera: a wolf in kangaroo's clothing."

"I remember the news films," Leo said. "Nasty."

"Viable, too," I said. "That was a tough fight. I'm still sorry I lost." It still rankled, I discovered.

Leo looked startled.

"I wanted to save 'em, Leo, but I got voted down. We really couldn't afford a new predator in that area."

"Don't look so shocked, Noisy," Susan said. "You never know what might be useful some day. Just suppose we get an overpopulation of rabbits or something and we need a predator to balance them out before they eat all *our* crops. That's why Mama Jason wanted to keep them."

Leo looked unconvinced, Susan looked hurt suddenly. "Just because it's ugly, Leo," she said, "doesn't mean you wipe it out. There's nothing pretty about a rock lobster but it sure as hell tastes good."

"I grant you that. I'm just not as sure about things that think *I* taste good."

Susan folded her arms across her chest and heaved another of those dramatic sighs. "Now I know what you're up against, Mama Jason," she said. "Pure ignorance."

That surprised me. I held my tongue for once, waiting to see how Leo would take that.

"Nothing pure about it," he said. "Don't insult a man who's trying to enlighten himself. That never furthered a cause." He paused, then added, "You sound like you take it very personally."

Susan dropped her eyes. There was something in that evasion that wasn't simple embarrassment or overstepping good manners. When she looked up again, she said, "I'm sorry, Leo. I just get so mad sometimes. Mama Jason—"

This time I had to come to her rescue. "Mama Jason sets a bad example, Leo. I come up here and rave about the rampant stupidity everywhere else. Susan, better to educate people than insult them. If I say insulting things about them when I'm in family that's one thing. But I would never say to somebody who was concerned about his kids or his crops what you just said to Leo."

"Yeah. I know. I'm sorry again."

"Forgiven," said Leo. "Better you make your mistakes on me and learn from them than make 'em on somebody else who might wallop you and turn you stubborn."

Susan brightened. "Oh, but I *am* stubborn, Leo! You always say so!"

"Stubborn, yes. *Stupid* stubborn—not that I've seen."

Again there was something other than embarrassment in her dropped eyes. I tried to puzzle it out, but I was distracted by a noise in the distance.

It came from the direction of the loch—something faint and unfamiliar. I cocked my head to listen harder and got an earful of sneezes instead.

"S-sorry!" Susan gasped, through a second series of sneezes. "P-pollen!" Then she was off again,

her face buried in a napkin.

Leo caught my eye. He thought the sneezing fit was as phony as I did.

“Well,” I said, “you may be allergic to the pollen”—she wasn’t, I knew very well—“but I came hoping I’d timed it right to see Loch Moose smoke. And to get in some contemplative fishing”—meaning I didn’t intend to bait my hook—“before it gets too dark.”

Susan held up her hand, finished off one last sequence of sneezes, then said, “What about your nap?”

“What do you think contemplative fishing *is*?”

“Oh. Right. Get Leo to take you, then. He knows all the best places.”

“I’d be honored,” Leo said.

We left Susan scrubbing her face. Pausing only to pick up poles in the hallway, we set off in silence along the footpath down to Loch Moose. When we got to the first parting of the path, I broke the silence. “Which way to your favorite spot?”

He pointed to the right fork. I’d figured as much. “Mine’s to the left,” I said and headed out that way. If Susan didn’t want me in my usual haunts, I wanted to know why. Leo followed without comment, so I knew he was thinking the same thing.

“Keep your ears open. I heard something before Susan started her ‘sneezing fit’ to cover it.”

We came to another parting in the path. I angled right and again he followed. Pretty soon we were skidding and picking our way down the incline that led to the otters’ playground.

When we got to surer footing, Leo paused. “Annie—now that I’ve got somebody to ask: will you satisfy my curiosity?”

That peaked mine. “About what?”

“Was there such a thing as the Loch Ness monster? I always thought my mother had made it up.”

I laughed. “And I thought my granddaddy had, especially since he claimed that people came to Loch Ness from all over the Earth hoping to catch a glimpse of the monster! I looked it up once in ships’ records. There really was such a place and people really did come from everywhere for a look!”

He was as taken aback as I’d been, then he heard what I hadn’t said. “And the monster—was *it* real? Did it look like any of the stories?”

“I never found out.”

“Pre-photograph?”

“No,” I said, “that was the odd thing about it. There were some fuzzy photos—old flat ones, from period when *everybody* had photographic equipment—that might have been photos of anything. The story was that Nessie was very shy and the loch was too full of peat to get sonograms. Lots of excuse no results.”

“Smoking too much weed, eh?”

“Lot of that going around,” I said. “But no, I suspect Nessie was exactly what granddaddy used her for—a story. What’s always fascinated me is that people went to *look!*”

Quite unexpectedly, Leo chuckled. “You underestimate the average curiosity. I don’t think you appreciate how many people stayed glued to their TVs while you folks rounded up those kangaroo rexes. A little thrill is high entertainment.”

“The hell it is,” I said indignantly. “I oughta know: I do it for a living. *They* didn’t get their boots chewed off by the damn things.”

“Exactly my point,” said Leo. “Scary but safe. Elly’s kids would be the first to tell you what a good combination that is. They watch their kangaroo rex tape about twice a week, and cheer for you every time.”

Some things I was better off not knowing, I thought. I sighed. Turning away from Leo, I got the full view of Loch Moose and its surroundings, which drew a second sigh—this time pure content.

The secret of its appeal was that despite the vast sparkle of sunlight that glittered off it, Loch Moose always felt hidden away—a place you and you alone were aware of.

It took me a while to remember that Leo was beside me. No, I take that back. I was aware that he was there all along, but he was as content as I to simply drink it all in without a word.

Sometime—when we were both done admiring the scene—we headed for the boats, by some sort of mutual agreement. I was liking Leo more and more. For another thing, the whistling of the otters made him smile.

The slope down to the boats was dotted with violets. Most of them were that almost fiery shade of blue that practically defines the species, but once in a while they came out white just for the surprise of it. Some were more surprising than white, though. Almost hidden in the deep shade was a small isolated patch of scarlet.

For the life of me, I couldn’t remember seeing any material on scarlet violets. I stooped for a closer look. Damned odd texture to the petals, too, like velvet.

“Pretty, aren’t they?” Leo said. “Stop by my place while you’re here, and I’ll show you half an acre of them.”

I stood up to look him in the eye. “Popped up all at once? First time, this year?”

“No. I’ve been putting them in when I found them for, oh, three years now.”

“Oh, Leo. Half of Mirabile thinks everything’s going to sprout fangs and bite them and the other half doesn’t even take elementary precautions. Never *ever* transplant something red unless somebody’s done a workup on it first!”

He looked startled. “Are they dangerous?”

“Don’t *you* start!” Dammit, I’d done it—jumped on him with both feet. “Sorry. I’m still fuming over those red daffodils, I guess.”

“Annie, I’m too damned old to worry about everything that flowers red. I took them for what my grandmother called ‘pansies.’ Much to her disappointment, she never could get any started on Mirabile. Maybe they aren’t, but that’s how I think of them. I’m going to hate it if you tell me I have to pull ’em out because they’re about to seed mosquitoes.”

And he’d never forgive me either, I could tell.

“We’ll get a sample on the way back, Leo. If there’s a problem, I’ll see if I can stabilize them for you.” He looked so surprised, I had to add, “Practical is not my only consideration. Never has been. ‘Pretty’ is just fine, provided I’ve got the time to spare.”

That satisfied him. He smiled all the way down to the edge of the water.

Two hands made light work of launching a boat and we paddled across to the sheltered cove I had always favored. I tied the boat to a low branch that overhung the water, dropped a naked hook into the

loch, and leaned back. Leo did the same.

What I liked best about this spot, I think, was that it was the perfect view of the otters' playground—without disturbing the play. It also meant I didn't have to bring along treats for the little beggars. Susan had been feeding them since she was—oh—Jen's age. They'd grown so used to it that they hustled the tourists now. I didn't believe in it myself, but as long as she didn't overdo it to the point they couldn't fend for themselves I wasn't about to make a fuss. I think Susan knew that too. She had a better grasp of the principles than most adults I knew, aside from those on the team, of course.

The hillside and water were alive with the antics of the otters. Some rippled snake-like through the water. One chased one of those king-sized dragonflies. Two others tussled on the ridge and eventually threw themselves down the incline, tumbling over and over each other, to hit the water with a splash.

Leo touched my arm and pointed a little to the side. He was frowning. I turned to take it in and discovered there was an altercation going on, just below the surface of the water. This one was of a more serious nature.

“Odd,” I said, speaking aloud for the first time since we'd settled in. He nodded, and we both kept watching but there wasn't anything to see except the occasional flick of a long muscular tail, the wild splash of water. A squeal of anger was followed by a squeal of distress and the combatants broke off, one of them hightailing it towards us.

I got only a glimpse as it passed us by but it seemed to me it was considerably bigger than its opponent. Biggest otter I'd seen, in fact. I wondered why it had run instead of the smaller one.

The smaller one was already back at play. Leo shrugged and grinned. “I thought mating season was over,” he said. “So did she, considering how she treated him.”

“Ah,” I said, “I missed the opening moves.”

We settled back again, nothing to perturb us but the otter follies, which brought us to laughter over and over again. We trusted nothing would interrupt that by tugging at our lines.

Shadow was beginning to lengthen across us. I knew we had another half hour before it would be too dark for us to make our way easily back up to the lodge. “Leo,” I said, “want me to head in? Your way will be in shadows long before mine.”

“Staying the night at the lodge. I promised Elly I'd do some handiwork for her. Besides, I could do with another of Chris's meals.”

There was a stir and a series of splashes to our right, deep in the cove. That large otter, back with friends. There were two troops of them in the loch now. I made a mental note to make sure they weren't overfishing the shrimp or the trout, then I made a second note to see if we couldn't spread the otters to another lake as well. The otters were pretty firmly established on Mirabile but it never hurt to start up another colony elsewhere.

I turned to get a better look, maybe count noses to get a rough estimate of numbers. I counted six, eight, nine separate ripples in the water. Something seemed a little off about them. I got a firm clamp on my suspicious mind and on the stories I'd heard all day and tried to take an unbiased look. They weren't about to hold still long enough for me to get a fix on them through the branches and the shadows that were deepening by the moment.

One twined around an overhang. I could see the characteristic tail but its head was lost in a stand of water lilies. Good fishing there, I knew. The trout always thought they could hide in the water lilies and the otters always knew just where to find them. Then I realized with a start that the water lilies

were disappearing.

I frowned. I untied the boat and gestured for Leo to help me get closer. We grabbed at branches to pull the boat along as silently as possible. To no avail: with a sudden flurry of splashes all around, the otters were gone.

“Hell,” I said. I unshipped the oars and we continued on over. I was losing too much of the light. I thrust down into the icy water and felt around the stand of lilies, then I grabbed and yanked, splattering water all over Leo. He made not a word of complaint. Instead, he stuck a damp match into his shirt pocket and tried a second one. This one lit.

It told my eyes what my fingers had already learned: the water lily had been neatly chewed. Several other leaves had been nipped off the stems as well—but at an earlier time, to judge from the way the stem had sealed itself. I dropped the plant back in the water and wiped my hands dry on my slacks.

Leo drowned the match and stuck it in his pocket with the first. It got suddenly very dark and very quiet on the loch.

I decided I didn’t want either of us out here without some kind of protective gear. I reached for the overhang and shoved us back toward the sunlit side of the loch. It wasn’t until I’d unshipped my oar again that I got my second shock of the day.

That branch was the one I’d seen the otter twined around. That gave me a belated sense of scale. The “otter” had been a good eight feet long!

I chewed on the thought all the way back to the lodge. Would have forgotten the violets altogether but for Leo’s refusal to let that happen. I put my pole back in its place and took the scarlet violet and its clump of earth from him. Spotted Susan and said, “Leo wants to see a gene-read. Can you have Chris send rock lobster for two up to my room?”

“It’s on its way.” She paused to glance at the violets. “Pretty,” she said, “I hope—”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Hey!” she said suddenly. “I thought you were here for a break?”

“How else can I lure Leo up to my room?”

“You could just invite him, Mama Jason. That’s what you’re always telling us: Keep it simple and straightforward...”

“I should keep my mouth shut.”

“Then you wouldn’t be able to eat your lobster.” With that as her parting shot, Susan vanished back into the dining room. I paused to poke my head around the corner—empty, just as Chris had predicted.

We climbed the stairs. I motioned Leo in, laid down the clump of violets and opened my gear. “Violets first,” I said, “as long as we’re about to be interrupted.”

I took my sample and cued up the room computer, linked it to the one back at the lab. There was a message from Mike waiting. “The daffodils have perked up, so they look good,” it said, “and the troops have returned from the Guernsey wars triumphant. We’ll call if we need you. You do the same.”

“You forgot to say how your hand is, dummy,” I growled at the screen—then typed the same in, for him to find in the morning.

The first-level gene-read on the violets went fast. The hard part was running it through ships’

records looking for a match or a near match. I could let that run all night while I slept through it.

Susan brought the rock lobster and peered over my shoulder as she set it down. “Mama Jason, I can keep an eye on that while you eat if you like.”

“Sure,” I said, getting up to give her the chair. Leo and I dug into our lobster, with an occasional glance at the monitor. “Watch this part, Leo,” I said. Susan had already finished the preliminary and was looking for any tacked-on genes that might be readable.

Susan’s fingers danced, then she peered at the screen like she was trying to see through it. Mike gets that same look. I suppose I do, too. “Mama Jason, I can’t see anything but the primary helix.”

“Okay.” Neither did I. “Try a match with violets.” To Leo, I added, “We might as well try the easy stuff first. Why run the all-night program if you don’t have to.” I ducked into the bathroom to wash rock lobster and butter off my fingers.

“No luck,” Susan called to me.

When I came out, Leo had disappointment written all over his face. “Buck up,” I said. “We’re not giving up that easily. Susan, ask the computer if it’s got a pattern for something called a ‘pansy’ or a ‘pansies.’”

“Pansy,” said Leo and he spelled it for her.

It did. Luckily, that wasn’t one of the areas we’d lost data in. “Oh, Mama Jason!” said Susan, “Will you look at *that*?”

We had a match.

“Leo, you lucky dog!” I said. “Your grandma would be proud of you!”

His jaw dropped. “You mean—they really *are* pansies?”

“Dead on,” I told him, while Susan grinned like crazy. I patted her on the shoulder—and gave her a bit of a nudge toward the door at the same time. “You bring Susan a sample of the ones you planted around your place, just so she can double-check for stability. But I think you’ve got exactly what you hoped you had.”

I pointed to the left side of the screen. “According to this, they should come in just about every color of the rainbow. We may have to goose them a bit for that—unless you prefer them all red?”

“Authentic,” said Leo, “I want them Earth-authentic, as long as you’re asking *me*.”

“Okay. Tomorrow then,” I told Susan. She grinned once more and left.

I sat down at the computer again. Wrote the stuff on the pansy to local memory—then I cleared the screen and called up everything ships’ records had on otters.

They didn’t eat water lilies, and they didn’t come eight feet long. Pointing to the genes in question I told Leo this.

“Does that mean there is a monster in the lake?”

“I can’t tell you that. I’m not terribly concerned about something that eats water lilies, Leo, but I do want to know if it’s chaining up to something else.”

“How do we find out?”

“I snag a cell sample from the beasties.”

Again his lips pressed together in that wry way. “May I offer you what assistance I can?” A sweeping spread of the hands. “I’m very good at keeping out of the way and at following orders. I’m

also a first-rate shot with a rifle and I can tell the difference between a monstrosity and a monster. I promise no shooting unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Let me think on it, Leo." Mostly I wanted to ask Elly if what he said was true.

He must have read my mind, because he smiled and said, "Elly will vouch for me. I'll see you in the morning."

That was all. Except maybe I should mention he kissed my hand on his way out. I was beginning to like Leo more and more.

After he left, I did some thinking on it, then I trotted downstairs to talk to Elly. I leaned against the countertop, careful not to get in the way of her cleaning, and said, "Tell me about Leo."

Elly stopped scrubbing for a moment, looked up, and smiled. "Like you," she said.

"That good or bad?"

The smile broadened into a grin. "Both. That means he's stubborn, loyal, keeps a secret *secret*, plays gruff with the kids but adores them just the same."

"Any permanent attachments?" It popped out before I knew it was coming. I tried to shove it back in, but Elly only laughed harder at my attempt.

"Why, Annie! I believe you've got a crush on Leo!" Still laughing, she pulled out a chair and sat beside me, cupping her chin in her hand. "I shouldn't be surprised. All the kids do."

I gave one of Susan's patented sighs.

"Okay, okay," she said, "I'll leave off. I like it, though. I like Leo and I like you and I think you'd get along together just fine."

"Is he as good a shot as he claims to be? And as judicious about it?"

That sat her upright and looking wary.

"No panic," I said firmly. "You *have* got something in the loch that I want a look at—but it's an herbivore and I doubt it's dangerous. It's big enough to overturn a boat maybe, but—"

"Are you calling in the team?"

"I don't think that's necessary. They could all do with a break—"

"That's what *you* came for. That's hardly fair."

I waved that aside. "Elly, you should know me better by now. I wouldn't have taken this up as a profession if I weren't a born meddler. And I asked about Leo because he offered to give me a hand." I know I scowled. "Money and equipment I can always get—it's the hands we're short."

"You're going to make off with half my kids one of these days."

I couldn't help it. I jerked around to stare at her. She was smiling—and that laugh was threatening to break out all over again. "Annie, surely it's occurred to you that half those kids want to be just like you when they grow up!"

"But—!"

"Oh, dear. Poor Mama Jason. You thought I was raising a whole passel of little Ellies here, didn't you?"

The thing was, I'd never given it any thought at all. More than likely I just assumed Susan and Chris and Ilanith would take over the lodge and...

Elly patted my hand. "Don't you worry. Chris will run the lodge and you and the rest can still drop

by for vacations.”

I felt guilty as hell somehow, as if I'd subverted the whole family.

Elly gave me a big hug. “Wipe that look off your face. You'd think I got chimerae instead of proper kids! The only thing I ask is that you don't cart them off until you're sure they're ready.”

“You'll worry yourself sick!”

“No. I'll worry the same way I worry about you. Do I look sick?”

She stood off and let me look. She looked about as good as anybody could. She knew it, too. Just grinned again and said, “Take Leo with you. Susan, too, if you think she's ready. I warn you, *she* thinks she is, but she'll listen to you on the subject.”

And that was the end of it as far as Elly was concerned. I walked back to my room, thoughtful all the way.

Damnify knew how I could have missed it. And there I'd been *aggravating* the situation as well, calling Susan “my assistant,” letting her do the gene-read on Leo's pansies. Then I thought about it some more.

She'd done a damn fine gene-read. If she'd heard Leo talk about the pansies, she'd have no doubt thought to try that second as well.

The more I thought, the more I saw Elly was right. It was just so unexpected that I'd never really looked at it.

I crawled into that comfortable bed and lay there listening to the night sounds off the loch and all the while I was wondering how soon I could put Susan to work. I drifted off into sleep and my dreams were more pleased by it all than I would have admitted to Elly.

I woke, not rested enough, to an insistent shaking of my shoulder and opened my eyes to see a goggle-eyed something inches from my face. Thinking the dream had turned bad, I mumbled at it to go away and rolled over.

“Please, Mama Jason,” the bad dream said. “Please, I *gotta* talk to you. I can't tell Elly, and I'm afraid it's gonna hurt her.”

Well, when a bad dream starts threatening Elly, I listen. I sat up and discovered that the bad dream was only Jen, the nine-year-old. “Gimme half a chance, Jen,” I said, holding up one hand while I smeared my face around with the other, trying to stretch my eyes into focus so I could see my watch. My watch told me I'd had enough sleep to function rationally, so I levered myself up.

Jen's eyes unpoped, squinched up, and started leaking enormous teardrops. She made a dash for the door, but by then I was awake and I caught her before she made her exit. “Hold on,” I said. “You don't just tell me something's out to hurt Elly and then disappear. Ain't done.”

Still leaking tears, she wailed, “It's supposed to be a *secret*...”

Which she wanted somebody to force out of her. Okay, I could oblige, and she could tell the rest. Mama Jason *made* her tell. I plopped her firmly on the edge of the bed. “Now wipe your nose and tell me what this is about. You'd think I was the chimera the way you're staring.”

“You gotta promise not to hurt Monster. He's Susan's.”

I did nothing of the sort. I waited and she went on, “I didn't know he was so *big*, Mama Jason!” She threw out those two skinny arms to show me just *how* big, which actually made it about three feet long tops, but I knew from the fingertip-to-fingertip glance that went with the arm fling that she meant

much bigger. “Now I’m scared for Susan!”

“What do you mean, he’s *Susan’s*?”

“Susan sneaks out at night to feed him. I never saw him, but he must be *awful*. She calls him Monster and he gurgles.” She shivered.

I gathered her up and held her until the shivering stopped. Obviously all this had been going on for some time. She’d only broken silence because of Stirzaker’s panicky report. “Okay,” I said, still patting her, “I want you to let me know the next time Susan sneaks out to feed this Monster of hers—

She blinked at me solemnly. “She’s out there now, Mama Jason.”

“Okay,” I said. “Out there *where*?”

The bellow off the loch cut me short and brought me to my feet. Unlike Leo, I knew that hadn’t been part of a dream. I was already headed for the window when the sound came again. I peered into the night.

Mirabile doesn’t have a moon, but for the moment we’ve got a decent nova. Not enough radiation to worry about, just enough to see glimmers in the dark.

Something huge rippled through the waters of the loch. I stared harder, trying to make it come clear, but it wouldn’t. It bellowed again, and an answering bellow came from the distant shore.

Whatever it was, it was huge, even bigger than the drifted otters I’d seen earlier. Had they chained up to something already? There was a splash and another bellow. I remember thinking Elly wouldn’t hear it from her room; she was on the downside of the slope, cushioned from the loch noises by the earth of the slope itself.

Then I got a second glimpse of it, a huge head, a long body. With a shock, I realized that it looked like nothing so much as those blurry flat photos of “Nessie.”

I turned to throw on some clothes and ran right into Jen, scaring her half to death. “Easy, easy. It’s just me,” I said, holding her by the shoulders. “Run get Leo—and tell him to bring his rifle.” I gave her a push for the door and that kid moved like a house afire.

So did Leo. By the time I’d got my gear together, double-checking the flare gun to make sure it had a healthy charge left, he was on my doorstep, rifle in hand.

We ran down the steps together, pausing only once—to ask Jen which way Susan had gone. Jen said, “Down to the loch, she calls it your favorite place! I thought you’d *know*!” She was on the verge of another wail.

“I know,” I said. “Now you wait here. If we’re not back in two hours, you wake Elly and tell her to get on the phone to Mike.”

“Mike,” she repeated, “Mike. Two hours.” She plopped herself down on the floor directly opposite the clock. I knew I could count on her.

Leo and I switched on flashlights and started into the woods. I let him lead for the time being—he knew the paths better than I did and I wanted to move as fast as possible. We made no attempt to be quiet at it, either. In the dark and shorthanded, I’ve always preferred scaring the creature off to facing it-down.

We got to the boats in record time. Sure enough, one of them was gone. Leo and I pushed off and splashed across the loch, Leo rowing, me with the shotgun in one hand and the flare gun in the other.

Nine times out of ten, the flare gun is enough to turn a Dragon’s Tooth around and head it away

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