

## *The Atlantic Sleeper*

“Your company specializes in acoustic trackers, right?”

It was as if this flutter-lashed, smiling Swedish biologist knew Gordon’s biggest secret: he had still had no idea what the difference between an acoustic tracker and a satellite tracker was.

Of course, she seemed delighted to meet someone around her own age, so, praying he was correct, Gordon grinned back and nodded.

“And you guys—” she was practically vibrating—“you guys have tagged sharks? In the North Pacific? I think we may have stumbled across some with Jakl trackers. Here—I’ve got a photo.”

He’d lied. Gordon had a bigger secret: He could not, for the life of him, tell a bull shark from a reef shark from a tiger shark. He *liked* sharks, because of *Jaws*. He didn’t *love* sharks. There was a difference.

To his immense luck, the photograph depicted not a reef, tiger, bull, or any other remotely-normal looking shark. A creature fresh off the set of *The Walking Dead* gaped through a polaroid sheen.

“Oh, that’s Toto,” Gordon said with an internal sigh of relief. A Greenland shark. *The Greenland* shark. He was not only familiar with this particular shark, but—as everyone at Jakl did—considered him a sort of pet. “So ugly he’s kinda cute, eh?”

Toto was its own special brand of ugly-cute. Actually, no—just plain ugly. Its skin was the texture and color of moldy cheese, its eyes milky worm-balls, not a tooth visible in that awkwardly gaping maw. But perhaps you get a pass when you’re the world’s oldest vertebrate in written history. After all, those five hundred years under your belt sure aren’t gonna make you prettier.

“Greenland shark, right? Figured you might be familiar with him, working for Jakl and all.”

Of course—tagging the record-breaking Toto was the biggest break any young company could hope for, and everyone at Jakl knew it. Gordon nodded proudly, deciding his intern status was moot, and offered her a cup of coffee. With a brief word of thanks, she slipped Toto’s sleepy mugshot back into her bag—and, to his relief, stuck with a topic he knew.

“I did give hákarl a try once,” she said conversationally as Gordon set the grounds into the filter. He glanced back.

*Greenland shark meat. Gordon Ramsey, you prepared me for this.* “Hope it was prepared right.”

“Oh, it was. No paralysis, no hallucinations, no nothing. The chef had been preparing hákarl for decades. A little strong for me, personally—they say it’s an acquired taste. My question, though—what fisherman thought the rotted-looking thing in his net would make for fine-dining?”

“Good question.” He didn’t bother with unfortunate-tasting things much. Marine biology may not have been in the cards for Gordon, but by God, if he couldn’t make one hot *damn* smokin’ cup of coffee. ‘Twas the season. Labrador winters could freeze the clothes to your skin, which demanded something like mocha—two chocolate pumps, one cream, five sugars, a perfect combination he’d taste-tested himself.

He popped the lid onto each cup and channeled all his charm into the presentation; she took a long sip and grinned. He did the same, and while they wandered, coffee burning their lips, he skimmed the newspaper he’d grabbed. The tight corridor was barely big enough to fit both of them.

“So you’re located in Sweden? What was it that brought you all the way over here?”

“Your Greenland shark, actually. Toto.” she chuckled. “Oh, I love that name. Better hope we’re able to help find him, right?”

Last evening, Toto’s tracker had stopped sending signals. Jakl’s call for international help had received the biggest clamor from freelancers—marinographers, mainly and marine biologists that operated on the coasts of southwest Scandinavia.

Gordon got the implication, of course. If the freelancers couldn’t find Toto, he was likely dead, killed by old age or predator.

Rafferty would prefer to be better known as a chef than a poacher, or what the folks that deem ‘poaching’ to be any kind of hunting outside of squirrels and coyotes. ‘Poacher’ also implies that you’re an implicitly greedy creature ruled by moneylust.

Rafferty, mind you, was ruled by nothing so selfish. His only mistress was the culinary arts. By the snapping young age of thirty-nine, he’d discovered his purpose in life: his Eight-Spice Reef Shark Soup recipe, which had won two awards and was now single-handedly keeping his diner afloat. The effects of the recent American crackdown on shark product sales was internationally devastating, a threat to his and many others’ livelihoods—if that called for a newly-purchased gill-net and a trip off into the Northwest Atlantic, so be it.

“For the final time, my mistress is the culinary arts, thank you. Neither the wage nor the lifestyle of a fisherman is particularly palatable, even in a situation like this. So. I’d like to know the price on this, please.”

Rafferty finished with a flourish of gill net, practically vibrating. The cashier’s eyes flicked fully open in renewed interest of what would likely be his only customer for the day.

“Three dollars.”

“Scan me.”

“No can do. Cash only, bub.”

He handed the single fifty in his wallet over the sign that said, “we don’t give change”.

“Appreciate the donation, son.”

“I’m about twenty five years past ‘son’ for you. And it’s not a donation—I plan to spend every dollar.”

Without any friendliness, the cashier shooed him towards the dingiest row of canoes in history.

Forty-seven dollars was probably enough to buy out the contents of the entire fisher’s shack; the lines were flimsy thread tied to sticks, the life vests styrofoamy. Only one thing looked like it might be of reliable enough quality, and that was the sturdy-keeled fisher’s vessel. Her name—“The Sleeper”—popped off the paint job of cascading indigo-blue.

“Forty-seven for that?”

The cashier turned the brim of his hat up curiously, brows raised. “If only it was mine to sell. Hey, Marmaduke. Here’s a bloke offerin’ just short of fifty.”

The fellow dropped his mop to reveal the worst case of sunspots Rafferty had ever seen. Sunsplotches were more accurate. Between that and a peculiar veininess, his entire person rather resembled a road map that someone had dripped coffee on.

“Oh, that old boat...? Uh-huh. Yeah, sure, for twenty,” he slurred, apparently only half-awake, his orange life vest still dripping with residue of the morning rain.

“Yes. Four...five, if—if you count the humpback,” Marmaduke said.

“Which we *don’t*,” said the cashier sharply, shooting him a glance.

“What kind of sharks?”

“Reef sharks,” the cashier interjected.

“What kind, sir?” Rafferty asked Marmaduke, who readily confirmed.

“I want the sharkskin. All of it.

Sacrifices had to be made, particularly in the department of companionship. Aware of the threat of multi-thousand fines looming above shark-fishers nowadays, he requested the assistance of a sunspotted and incredibly veiny fellow named Marmaduke for the more mechanical tasks, like driving the boat and finning the shark. Marmaduke was the most perfect boat-driver he could ask for—a man whose slack expression screamed ‘incredibly compliant’.

So, spices in one hand and gill net and rod in the other, Rafferty followed Marmaduke onto the sea in *The Sleeper*, a sturdy vessel painted in a cascade of ever-deepening blues.

“Whitetip Reef shark. I never dreamed of having to work with anything but the giants of the southwest Keys, but now the *entire* area is a hotspot for geoscientists. It,” he enunciated, “always looks *triangular*. Not triangular, not square, certainly not like a flat kite. Capece? Long, blunt pectorals, wide flat body. Slow. Similar to a tiger shark, but the key difference is that the tiger shark will eat anything that fits in its mouth, belt buckle and all. Any questions?”

“Yeah. Does it have white fin tips?”

Marmaduke showed him how to first cast the chum so that it bloomed in red-brown clouds across the grey surface, and then bait the rod.

“Now what?” Rafferty asked Marmaduke.

He sat down, prematurely abused knees creaking, and shut his eyes. “Now, nothing.”

“For how long?”

As long as it takes, Marmaduke said. Rafferty proceeded belowdecks to set up his marinade ingredients—the reef shark fins would need to marinate as soon as possible. Not much he could do but pray Marmaduke knew what a reef shark was.

From upstairs came several rounds of splashing and a high pitched whoop from Marmaduke, and as Rafferty made his way up to the commotion, he had never thought of catching sharks as quick and easy as this.

Rafferty caught a full glimpse of Marmaduke's catch, which was slate-gray and quite stout. Its underbelly flashed white, setting off alarm bells in Rafferty's head.

"I CAN'T KEEP PULLING THIS REEL FOREVER, MAN!" Marmaduke cried, clutching for dear life, trailing off into unnecessarily campy yells. Rafferty sighed, biting back a reminder that this was *not* an action novel.

Rafferty added his weight to the dangerous game of tug-of-war, with their shark flailing on one end and adrenaline-addled Marmaduke, sweat falling from his face in waterfalls, fighting just as hard on the other. Rafferty turned the tides so fast that he nearly got brained by the shark's tail as it tipped right out of the gill net and onto the Sleeper's deck with a moist THUMP. Rafferty marveled at its proximity; for a moment, his own reflection gawked back at him in its black-marble eye as it perceived him, and began to flop mightily.

The deck went balking, rolling from flank to flank, brine spattering Rafferty and Marmaduke from every side as the madly flailing shark wrestled with the net. The hooks ensnaring its dorsal and caudal fins clanked; even immobilized, its jaws, in a burst of frenetic daring, shot out and caught one of Rafferty's precious Doc Martens. Rafferty yanked his foot away as soon as he felt the chomp of teeth; hot terror jolting through him, he scrambled back, yanking an amazed Marmaduke with him.

The shark was far larger than any requiem shark and stout as a football. "What kind of 'reef shark' do you think this is, sir?" he gritted out over Marmaduke's amazed stuttering.

“One I caught!” Marmaduke’s face, through a sheen of sweat, was shining. “One *I* caught! I caught a whitetip shark! A real shark!”

“Whitetips,” Rafferty hissed drily, gesturing with his hands the shark’s stout-as-a-football shape, “do *not* look like that. Sir, you’ve caught us a porbeagle.”

Marmaduke’s hyperactive ecstasy vanished, replaced by hyperactive horror. “What kind of a joke is that? I’d never kill a dog!”

“A porbeagle,” Rafferty said, frantically running through his culinary school knowledge, “A Great White Mini.”

Oh, God, the soup. Could it be salvaged? Could porbeagle be spiced to mimic reef shark? Would his business pull through? Would his family still love him?

A tap on his shoulder.

“What do I do now?” Marmaduke asked, guiltily aiming his pointer finger at the flaccid porbeagle, gone to the great coastlines of eternity.

“Well, fine. Fin it,” Rafferty ordered. “I’ll take care of the marinade.”

It was as if the universe knew Rafferty’s most hated format of cooking: televised bake-offs. Improvisation would be his downfall, Rafferty thought as he surveyed the ingredients available in his little red cooler.

Molasses. *Too sweet.*

Ginger. *Maybe, as long as five-spice seasoning didn’t fall out of my pocket when I was reeling that thing in.*

Lemon juice: *Sure, with black pepper.*

Black pepper. *Bingo.*

Capers. *Awful for soup, but good for intensifying mild flavor.*

Maple extract. *Absolutely not.*

Peanut oil. *...right, never taught my assistant which oil substitutes are unacceptable.*

Perhaps this soup would be of a new variety. The familiar smells of spices had calmed Rafferty down and allowed him to realize that Marmaduke's mistake might have been a massive stroke of luck. Indeed, this soup's Russian and Asian flavors would make a critic of the most casual consumer, but high-demand porbeagle meat would allow him to charge twice the price for half the amount. And with the recent crackdown on shark products, probably even more.

Frankly, who cared if Rafferty's award-winning soup recipe came out a little funny? It was as his old Rolex-collecting friend always said: rarity creates the illusion of quality.

So he chose to combine lemon juice, black pepper, ginger, capers, five-spice seasoning (miraculously still in his pocket) and peanut oil for the marinade, and walked out onto the open deck to find Marmaduke hunched over in the cut-slit-slice of the sinewy dorsal. The other seven, pelvic fins and caudals, laid in a pile of triangles and crescents to his right. The worst part of the job—the blood—had made a mahogany mess of the deck and poor Marmaduke's jacket.

"It's awful," Marmaduke said wretchedly, sticky hands held away from him as if he'd used them to kill a litter of puppies rather than expertly clean up a perfectly good catch. "I thought you were gonna be the one doing—all this."

"Of course not, sir," Rafferty said primly, grinning as he reached down to swoop all eight fins into the marinade bowl, "I couldn't have done half a beautiful job as you have."

If Rafferty was to take one thing away from this trip, it was that boat-drivers could be truly full of surprises. Marmaduke hid an arsenal of card tricks up his sleeve, pun intended,



which entertained them for hours. He could swivel each eye in a different direction. Rafferty was delighted by a special trick of Marmaduke's in particular: driving a boat in his sleep. Awesome, especially because it meant he could treat himself to a good night's sleep belowdecks.

His 'good night's sleep' was filled with needle-like teeth tearing him apart like a toy, fish hooks in his fingertips, howls of pain coming out in streams of bubbles. The stench of chum was like a sickeningly affectionate leech, clinging to his nostrils as he drifted in and out of the nightmare. But while they slept, under a blanket and behind the wheel respectively, a pair of big shadows discovered the remains of the chum and the Porbeagle. Invisible in the gray morning, they circled the Sleeper, scarred white flank bumping against her painted blue hull, and if the unnatural tilting motion awoke Rafferty, he was dead to the world. Nightmares already forgotten, he re-secured the blanket as oblivion reclaimed him.

Even before he cracked open his eyes, Rafferty could tell his morning headache was going to grow into something fierce. Thankfully, morning had yet to brighten the hold's merciful(if rather damp) darkness. However, Rafferty was now colder than he'd ever been. Colder than Tofino, colder than the Fundy Isles. Colder than that one time when he drunkenly agreed to go skinny-dipping in subzero Labrador.

A single shaft of delicate light had snuck in through the open hatch, but it provided no warmth to combat the chill that had bore down overnight. When Rafferty reached to haul himself up and out, he found his fingers so numb that gripping the rails was a struggle.

Marmaduke was still at the wheel, head plunked dopily upon his own shoulder. Wet hair dripped into his open snoring mouth; Rafferty shivered in solidarity. Marmaduke's hands, with a very responsible mind of their own, were still guiding the wheel. The steely blue-ish gray of the

sky was just about all there was to see. No land, no whales, no dogfish. No color. The Sleeper had officially entered the privates of nowhere.

The marinating fins had been hung on a stringer for the night; Rafferty was ready to fuss over them like newborn children if it meant that this sweet-lovin' soup might turn out alright. He could poach. He could cook. By God, if he couldn't marinate these simple—  
His thoughts were interrupted by the empty line blowing into his face.

For a moment Rafferty stood there like a trench-coat-wearing, stupid dog, staring at the empty fin stringer as it flapped in the wind, and could only think, *huh*. Why were the products of their hard work not there? Where did they go? Did Marmaduke touch—  
“*Marmaduke!*” he yelled. Marmaduke, barely five feet away, was on his feet in a blink, squinting at Rafferty, and then taking a few more generous steps back.

“Don't be offended,” he mumbled tentatively, “but you got pale. You look really bad.”

“Don't misdirect,” Rafferty's hands were like a pair of small, rabid animals, his gestures growing so wild they made several close calls with Marmaduke's nose, “The fins, they were right there, where did they go?”

“The fins? They're right th—” Marmaduke tore his cautious gaze from Rafferty's flying fingers to the line, his freckled face dawning. “I'll check it out. I guess the line was loose?”

Rafferty nearly yanked his hair in frustration. Just when he was convinced Marmaduke had some street smarts—

His internal tirade was interrupted by an eruption of noise, a chorus of “*Oh God*”'s and “*No*”'s and “*If I'd known*”'s, along with several other incoherent but frustrated expletives. Before Rafferty could ask if everything was alright, he found himself nearly being shoved over the edge of the salt-and-ice-encrusted railway, eyes immediately puckering in the billowing spray. He

coughed and blinked hard, straining to see beyond the formaldehyde-green surface. Rafferty blinked into the dark green waters, barely able to make out a bulky outline; he rubbed his eyes hard, squinted down at the sinuous slithering of what was—get this—another shark.

“That’s not a porbeagle, is it?” Marmaduke’s question was quiet, as in fear of the answer. He didn’t need an expert; it swam closer, crescent fins attached to a creature of immense length. It seemed to crowd out the surrounding ocean, somewhat like a Burmese python overrunning its little kindergarten-classroom cage, as if nature had never expected her nibbly little goldfish to grow into this beast.

Marmaduke, having found his breath, harrumphed. “Man, I knew Jones was wrong about them. They’re not really that big.”

“Why don’t you jump in for an objective assessment?”

“I mean, it’s *maybe* comparable to a pickup truck? Eh. Jones, he had me going for like, an eighteen-wheeler—”only the small ones, though”, he told me—”

Marmaduke continued, unaware that Rafferty’s attention was elsewhere, as from beneath the Sleeper emerged a second shadow, slithering just like the first.

Well. Wouldn’t Rafferty commit first-degree murder for a cup of coffee. Or some hot soup.

“Of course I do,” he growled. “Fire up the engine and turn this thing around. Best way to lose these things is to ride the current.”

Perhaps the universe was taking pity on their plight, because Rafferty and Marmaduke had managed to avoid recreating the events of *Jaws*. The two white sharks had taken chase to the Sleeper, but Marmaduke steered her onto a lucky current flowing north, which ran faster and colder the longer they stayed on it. Unfortunately, the Sleeper ended up even further from Labrador than anticipated. Fortunately, the Sleeper was able to easily lose the whites.

Marmaduke, who was much braver without sharks beneath his feet, suggested that they'd just been curious. Rafferty was too busy working himself up to listen.

*They really had to go and take a sledgehammer to my vision for the soup, he thought miserably. God. My capers. I slaved for that caper money. And fresh lemon juice. Ginger. Tahini. The finest kind of shark meat money can buy. An award-winning combination. All in some great white's belly now.*

It had seemed perfectly safe to assume that Jaws's portrayals of white sharks leaping from the water were exaggerations—maybe they could breach, but spectacular heights were simply unrealistic.

The few truths in Hollywood were never good ones, were they?

Two more days of directionless drifting before they found not land, but *something*. Adjacent to the iced hull bobbed what appeared to be some rotted log with fins in the ripples of the Sleeper. Large, but certainly not a great white, nor a porbeagle, or even a mako. Its oval-shaped body rolled like a rotted log. Like everything else in the Northern Atlantic, it seemed half-asleep.

Rafferty buried his face in his icy hands, overcome with relief. "Marmaduke, come help me pull this up."

It simply laid there, just as lifeless on land. No struggle. Parasites hung from eyes opaque as white marbles, and stuck to its dorsal was a tracker spelling out 'JAKL' in synthetic purple. It seemed peaceful, and sad, somehow.

"We—we can't eat it," Marmaduke said, though his words were painfully fragile. "Sir, you see the tracker, it has a name and everything—and the scientists, they'll hunt us down..."

"The tracker needs to come off, then," hissed Rafferty.

Hunger had darkened his sardonicism into a ruthless mixture of entitlement and aggression. The change was visible in his entire body, curling his shoulders inward and tilting his chin down to glower with a pair of twitching hazel eyes under the bony ridge of his brows. His lips were cracked, pale asphalt, the very pickiness that had once defined him as a person now inconceivable. He was reduced to the chill in his bones, his failure as a chef, and the agonizing pit in his stomach.

Rafferty stared at him, but Marmaduke's gaze remained inextricable from his laces, refusing to acknowledge him or the graying body at his feet. "I won't do it."

As if Rafferty had been awaiting permission himself, he pulled the tracker from the shark, crushing it beneath his boot heel before snatching the knife from Marmaduke's belt; Marmaduke shut his eyes, wondering if he was actually going to stab him, but he reopened them to Rafferty, rending chunks of white flesh from the shark—and, in the same breath, gulping them down.

Starvation didn't stop his gag reflex from triggering at the rancid taste of ammonia, but as he wrestled to keep it down, the beast in his stomach quieted down just the slightest bit. The next piece went down a bit easier, then the next, and the next, and soon Rafferty's fingers and toes started tingling. How odd. He choked out a laugh.

He tried to turn his head to watch Marmaduke take a very small bite of the meat. His first swallow left him choking, right hand over his stomach, left clamped over his mouth. His eyes suddenly bugged out of their sockets. But that was the last Rafferty saw of him, because his own eyes flew back in his skull and he was back underwater, orange bubbles forming sharp prisms as he called upon his tongue and rapidly crumbling vocabulary. *Hello? Can you hear me?*

*Hello?*

The bubbles formed fish hooks, each an iridescent midnight purple, each tugging Rafferty in a different direction.

*Hello?!*

His arms weren't his own, his legs weren't his own. They didn't follow his command.

He tried again. *Can you hear me?*

Rafferty was lying, limbs strewn helter skelter, a monstrous candy cane towering over him. The sour thrum of neon yellow burned his sensitive ears.

Marmaduke had rematerialized in the fetal position, amusingly imitating a rocking horse—to, fro, to, fro, head in his arms.

*Show me that weird thing you can do with your eyes again,* Rafferty wanted to say, but found his jaw locked like a bear trap, unable to be opened by even him.

Marmaduke's eyes cracked open, but they weren't Marmaduke eyes—nope, cutting into Rafferty's soul were two beady, slit-pupiled eyes. His lips stretched back to reveal overlapping rows of teeth. Each of which, a serrated triangle.

Rafferty considered bludgeoning himself back into reality. The nightmare continued to assault Rafferty in ripples, loops of distortion that merged all five of his senses into an amalgamation of sensation. Any thought, of his newfound paralysis or other, was whisked away like a bird caught in a tornado.

A single thought surfaced in the maddening cacophony: *What's wrong with teeth and yellow eyes?*

And since Rafferty couldn't do much else, he fought for an answer. He raked through his whirling thoughts, he asked his fear, and even his memories, but the rising quagmire in his mind

swallowed each question, one by one, and left him with blank eyes and limbs that sagged limply across chilly tideside stones.

“It’s a curious story,” she said.