

The Ceremony

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"Look who's here!"

You glance up, startled but pleasantly surprised to see your grandparents swimming in through the front door. You swim over and hug them.

"Good to see you!" you say. "What brings you here?"

"Oh, we wouldn't miss it for the world!" your grandmother says.

"You'll do great, Sport," your grandfather chimes in, putting his hand on your shoulder. "We're both very proud of you."

You frown in bewilderment. "Uh, what are you talking about?" you ask.

"Why, the ceremony, of course!" your grandmother replies, looking at you quizzically. "Don't you know? Edna!" she calls out to your mom, "Haven't you told him about..." she trails off, lowering her voice.

"We figured we'd wait until you got here," your mom replies. "No sense making him worry for days on end!"

Your father swims in, sees your mother's parents, and hugs your grandmother and shakes hands with your grandfather. "Good to see you all," he says. "Safe trip?"

But before she can answer, the door bursts open, and his parents swim in.

"There's the man of the hour!" your other grandfather says boisterously, coming over to clap you on the shoulder. "You ready for your big day?"

"They haven't told him, yet," your mom's mom interjects.

Your dad's dad whirls in surprise. "What?! Jerry, you can't just spring something like this on a kid!"

"He's a man, now," your father replies, "And we thought it was better to wait to tell him."

"Tell me *what?!?*" you ask. All of the adults stop and look at you.

"Well, Son," your mom begins slowly, "There comes a time in every boy's life when it's time for him to perform a ceremony—"

"A rite of passage into adulthood," your dad's dad chimes in.

"Dear, let them tell him," your dad's mom chides her husband.

"All of the boys your age will be performing the ceremony tonight," your dad says. "Mike and Alex are both probably having this talk with their families as we speak."

You squirm under all the eyes watching you. "Um, well, what do I have to do?" you ask.

"You'll find out more at the ceremony," your mom says. "Don't worry; you have everything you need."

Your stomach turns. You *hate* being the center of attention, and to think that everybody knew this was going to happen—whatever it is—and didn't tell you just makes you feel...like you're the last one to know.

"Well, are we all ready?" your dad asks. There are nods all around. "Well, then, let's get going!"

"Now?!" you ask. "But I'm not ready; I don't even—"

"It'll all make sense once we get there," your mom says. "Your grandparents aren't as fast as they used to be, and we've got a ways to go, so we need to get a head-start."

"Are we swimming?" you ask. "We're not taking the car?"

Your parents shake their heads. "It's tradition to swim," your father says. "Besides, some of the places we're going, the car can't get through."

"You know the way, dear?" your mom asks your dad.

"Of course," your father replies. "Son, you'd best pay attention to where we're going. One day you'll be proudly leading *your* son to the ceremonial grounds!"

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He leads the way, making sure to go slowly enough that your grandparents can keep up with him, and you bring up the rear as you all set out.

You make it onto the main thoroughfare and are surprised to see dozens of other groups all converging. As soon as they join up, they begin chattering amongst each other. You look off to the right and see Mike and his family.

"Mike!" you call.

He sees you and swims your way.

"What's going on?" he asks nervously.

"I dunno...my parents just told me something about a ceremony," you reply.

"Yeah, mine, too. Did they tell you anything about it?"

"Nah, they said I'd find out when I got there."

"Mine, too. This isn't cool, man! I—I feel like we're on death row or something."

"Dead fish swimming," you chuckle nervously.

"Hey, guys!" Alex says, swimming up.

"Alex, do *you* know what's going on?"

"Nah, but seeing the whole town get out like this? Whatever it is, it's gonna be *big*!"

"And we're the center of attention," you say uncomfortably.

"I know, right? It's gonna be awesome: all eyes on us as we do...whatever it is we do!"

"Seriously, if this happens every year, how is this the first we're finding out about it? My dad said he did it, so surely we would have seen *this* many people all walking around?" you say.

Alex shrugs. "Eh, I wouldn't worry about it. I mean, supposedly *all* the males have done it, right? And they're all here to tell the tale, so how bad can it be?"

"True," you say.

But you don't have any more time to ponder it. Practically every adult in town has joined the swim, and the group has all veered off to the right. You'd never noticed this part of town before—just never had any reason to go here, you guess. It's old and has lots of plants, coral, and rocks in the way. All the townsfolk are swimming into what looks like a building made of coral. You can see now why the car wouldn't have helped much.

Inside is a huge, round auditorium with a massive, round stage in the middle. In the middle of the stage, there is a black curtain blocking off the centermost circle of the stage. The screened off area must be thirty or forty feet in diameter, and the surrounding stage extends easily another fifty or sixty feet beyond that. The stage is big enough that everybody in town could stand on it if they wanted to, and that is in fact where everybody is headed.

"Newcomers go to the middle," an attendant says. "Newcomers to the middle. Find your name and stand outside your doorway. Families stand behind."

She drones on in a repetitive loop. You can feel excitement in the air as everybody gets closer to the stage. You don't know what the hubbub is all about, but the anticipation is palpable.

As you draw nearer to the stage, you realize that the black curtains do in fact have a series of little doorways cut into them extending all the way around the perimeter. Each doorway has a name printed above it on a white sign.

"Hey, Alex, here's yours," Mike says, pointing.

"Good luck, dude," Mike says.

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You each take turns embracing, and then Alex and his family go to stand just outside the doorway. Mike's door comes next, and he peels off, leaving you to find your own door.

You finally find it, clear around on the other side. You wish you weren't so far from your friends, but at least you have your family here to support you. You stand outside your doorway feeling nervous.

The doorway is little more than a strip of fabric that hangs down to obscure your view of what's inside. Occasional currents make it flutter, but as best as you can tell, it's completely dark inside.

"Newcomers, step inside," a voice booms over the PA.

"Good luck, Kiddo!" your mom says, kissing your forehead.

"Do us proud, Son!" your dad cheers.

You take a step forward, peel back the curtain, and step inside. Sure enough, it is pitch-black dark inside.

"Proceed forward," a gentle voice says.

There are groans of protest from around the room—how are you supposed to move forward when it's completely dark? Still, you want to look good for your parents, and you begin carefully swim forward, putting your hands out in front of you to prevent you from running into anything. You can hear the others doing the same. The energy is palpable here, too, but it's more nervous than anything.

"Stop," the voice says.

You come to a halt and stand there nervously. It is completely dark: you don't know whether you're an inch from the outside or the middle or halfway in between.

The lights abruptly come on, and you're at first blinded by their intensity. You squeeze your eyes closed and cover your face. But as your eyes adjust, you look in front of you and recoil several steps. A huge monster at least ten feet long is chained before you. Bipedal like you, he kneels on two powerful legs. From your position at his side, you can see the massive claws on his feet, each as long as you are tall, sprouting from bony feet that taper into wiry lower legs. His thighs are twice as big in diameter as you are tall, bulging with muscles and covered in smooth, glossy, dark and almost black skin strangely devoid of scales.

Your heart pounds at seeing such a creature, and you almost turn and run. Out of the corner of your eye, you can see others doing exactly that. But around his waist are numerous thick, heavy chains that keep him kneeling. Both of his ankles are shackled tightly to the floor, and you follow his powerful legs to a muscular, whitish core with gray and gold painted onto his six-pack and well-defined pecs. His arms are just as powerful as his legs, and you can see that his wrists are bound just like his ankles. He is bent over backwards in a position that must be terribly uncomfortable. His black, jagged dorsal fin digs sharply into the ground, and his underside is completely exposed and vulnerable—if you could apply such a term to such a massive beast! His tail looks like tattered cloth, but make no mistake: it's powerful enough to flip a semi with ease. It has multiple shackles running around it, each of them stiffly bolted to the floor.

But most fearsome of all, the thing that makes you *really* want to turn and flee, is his face. Shark-like in appearance, sharp-nosed, and full of teeth, his face is twisted into an angry sneer. The back and top of his head are dark like the rest of him, while the front of his face is off-white. His beady eyes survey the room with a cold, calculating gaze, as if plotting what order to kill you all in.

"Behold, newcomers," a voice says, "A kragath!"

The blood drains from your face. You had heard stories of such creatures, but you always assumed they were just things to scare young children into behaving! Now here was one chained in front of you! The voice seemed to aggravate it, and it tried to lash out with its tail. The chains rattled and shook violently, making several of the newcomers nearer to his tail jump and run away. You take a hesitant step backwards and bump into something. You whirl to find your parents standing there, smiling.

"It's all right," you mom says, turning you around to face the creature. "He can't hurt you; he's chained up."

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"This is the ceremony, Son," your dad says as he and your mom begin slowly walking forward, herding you closer to the creature. "This is a kragath, what used to be the most devastating predator to our species. As a great philosopher once said, 'know thy enemy.' You are at the age, son, where it is your duty to help defend the town, and the first step to doing that is knowing what you are up against."

Despite your weak attempts to get away, they've now walked you up so close to the creature that you can almost reach out and touch him.

"Get a feel for him, Son," your dad says. "Feel his skin. See how rough it is? As smooth and glossy as he looks, he's as rough as sandpaper. In olden times, they used that rough skin to fend us off when we tried to fight back. They slaughtered us by the dozen, and we were powerless to fight them. Go, Son. Go explore on your own. You'll be quite safe. Just mind his teeth."

With that send-off, your parents take a step back, leaving you to explore at your own pace. It's scary but also kind of exhilarating, swimming around this creature trapped here like a living museum exhibit. Your curiosity gets the better of you, and you reach out to feel his skin. It really *is* just like sandpaper! His body jerks, rattling the chains, and you jump backward, looking up at him in fear. Your heartbeat slows a bit, and you approach again, this time swimming up to follow the contours of his legs. As you rise above his thighs, you gasp. You know now why your parents referred to him as a "he": a chain wrapped tightly around his waist has forced out a throbbing, crimson-colored set of hemipenes. They're the only things on him not restrained, well, those and his testes. Each of his orbs is about half the size of your head, and they, like his hemipenes, sit on proud display between his legs, unable to retract into him because of the chain about his waist.

The whole situation seems so surreal. Here you are, checking out the genitalia of a creature that until just minutes ago you were certain was made-up. A thought crosses your mind. You glance at the creature, make sure he really is chained down, and then swim over to his hemipenes. Swallowing nervously, you cock pack and punch them.

The beast roars with anger, his hemipenes swatting at you as his body shakes against the chains. You yelp and swim backwards quickly to avoid the onslaught.

"Are you quite satisfied?" a voice asks, a hint of mirth in his voice.

You turn to see the mayor looking over your shoulder.

"Not to worry, son; there's always somebody who has to try it," he chuckles. He leans in close and whispers in your ear, "When I was the newcomer, it was me."

You grin in spite of yourself as he nods and continues his slow stroll around the room, observing the other newcomers. Meanwhile, you continue your exploration, admiring the ridges of muscle on the creature's torso and rippling across his biceps. This thing really is designed as a killing machine. You can't help but wonder how it came to be here.

"Newcomers," the mayor calls, "Gather around."

You turn and follow the others as they all swim over to sit in a circle around him.

"Now, I'm sure you have *all* heard the tales of the kragath," he says. "Why have our people been so afraid of them?"

"They used to eat us," someone says.

"That's right, they did. And you can all see that were this one not restrained, he would have no trouble decimating the town."

"How did he get here?" someone asks.

"Times have changed a lot since we were preyed upon by species such as his," the mayor replies. "Now we catch them with big ships that are far harder to overpower than we are. Make no mistake: even with our ships, it still takes a whole bunch of men to man the harpoons and subdue one. Many brave men fought this beast for two solid days before they tired him out enough to bring him in."

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He let that sink in, and then continued with another question. "Can anyone tell me *why* they liked to eat us so much?"

"Fertility," you murmur automatically.

"What was that?"

You look up, startled that he heard you. You clear your throat. "Uh, fertility. They thought eating us would make them, you know, um...more virile."

The mayor nods slowly, impressed. "Quite right, my boy," he said. "You're the first to be able to answer that question in quite some time. For that, you will get to go first."

You glance around. "Uh, first?" you ask.

The mayor nods again but ignores your question. "Yes, they used to eat us because they believed that doing so would make them better lovers," he said, addressing the others. "It so happens that they weren't completely wrong. There is a certain hormone that they and we share." He chuckles. "And as it turns out, it works both ways: if *we* eat *them*, *we* become more virile." He turns to you. "That is why you get to go first: you get to choose which part of him you're going to eat, and if I may suggest so, I would start with either the testes or the hemipenes. Both are rich in the hormone, richer than any other part of him. They're also tenderer and easier to bite into than the rest of his skin."

You do a double-take. "Wait, what?" you ask, disbelieving, "We're gonna eat him?"

The mayor nods. "Yes, of course, my boy," he replies. "That is what the ceremony is all about: exerting dominance over a species that once preyed upon us."

"But...he's chained up," you reply. "Are we...are we gonna kill him and cook him or something?"

The mayor shakes his head. "No, my boy. His kind did not do us the pleasure of killing us first; they bit into us while we writhed in pain. An eye for an eye." He addressed the group. "Each year, we capture one of his kind and inflict upon them the pain they have inflicted upon us. They grabbed us in those terrible claws, sometimes impaling us as they did so, and then they proceeded to rip parts of us off bite-by-bite. Our ceremony is just; our ceremony is fitting."

All around you are nods from the adults in the room. The energy in the room has only increased, some kind of palpable anticipation all the adults feel but the target of which you haven't quite picked up on, yet.

"All rise," the mayor says, lifting his arms and his staff of the city. "Let us all turn and watch as the first bite is taken."

Everybody turns to look at you.

"M—me?" you ask weakly. "I—I don't think I want to..."

"It's a great honor to be chosen to take the first bite, Son." You feel your father's hand on your shoulder. "Don't throw away your once-in-a-lifetime chance!"

You turn to face him.

"But...he's helpless," you say to him, glancing past him at the creature. "And clearly he can think! Doesn't that make *us* the monsters? He—"

"If he could get free, he would be eating every one of us right now," your father interrupts sternly in a low voice. "You heard the mayor: many men worked for *days* to bring him here. Don't—don't squander their sacrifice! How ungrateful would that be?"

You swallow, feeling a knot in the pit of your stomach. You sigh. "All right, I'll do it," you say quietly.

"That's my boy," your dad says, putting his hand on your shoulder. "I'm proud of you, Son."

He takes a step back, and all eyes are on you once more. You turn your back to everybody and stare nervously at the creature in front of you. He glares at you with a beady eye, and as you approach, he begins thrashing violently against his chains. It's like he knows what's going to happen. Steeling yourself against fear of him hurting you and the growing knowledge that you're going to hurt him, you swim over to

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his left testicle and hold it in your hands. It's heavy, hot, and rather smelly with musk. You grimace and then realize you have no idea how to do the deed.

"Uh, do I use a knife or something?" you turn and ask your father.

He chuckles. "No, Son. Only weak males use utensils; true leaders dig in with their teeth."

"Their *teeth*?" you ask, shocked.

"Well, of course, Son! That's why your teeth jut out like a piranha and why you have so many of them: they're designed to rip bits of flesh from larger creatures."

Your heart pounds as you nod understanding. Geez, not only do you have to be the first to injure this thing, you have to get up close and personal with his junk? Your stomach turns, and you're not sure if you can do this. But a glance back at your dad standing there so very proud of you gives you confidence. If he's sure you can do this, then so are you.

You swallow and put your hands on the kragath's flesh again, more resolutely this time. He senses it and thrashes violently, but his orbs can hardly move due to all the restraints tying him down. You take a deep breath, hold it, and bring your face close to his sac. You count in your head, 1, 2, 3...

You bite down.

A blood-curdling shriek deafens the room as the creature lurches against his restraints, threatening to rip them out of the floor. Blood streams from his scrotum, and in your shock, you let go, leaving him pierced with dozens of holes where your teeth used to be. The scent of blood trickles through the air, feeding the anticipation in the room.

"Well done, well done," the mayor says, stepping over. "I—wait, you didn't actually swallow it?"

You open your mouth to speak but can't say anything. The mayor shakes his head. "No, no, son, you've got to take the first bite out of him before the others can join in. Come on, we're all waiting on you!"

Your face burns with embarrassment, but an encouraging, patient look and a thumbs-up from your father encourage you to try again. Once more, you hold your breath, grip the kragath's already-bleeding testicle in your hands, and press your face against the broken skin.

He screams again, but this time, you come back with shredded bits of his scrotum and part of his testicle trailing from your mouth. You pull back, and his coiled testicle unravels like a ball of yarn before your eyes. At first, the gamy flavor is terribly off-putting, but as you chew, something changes in your mind. It's like a part of you that had always lain dormant suddenly activated. Your pupils constrict, and suddenly all you can think about is *more*. All at once, you understand the anticipation the adults feel. You lunge for another bite, grab hold of his testicle-strand, and begin slurping it up like a big spaghetti noodle, the force of your slurping spinning his dwindling testicle about the tendon that holds it in place until there's little left.

Strong hands grab you and pull you away.

"Wait for the others, Son," your father says as he and the mayor both hold you back. Blood trickles down your chin, and you look back at them wild-eyed.

"Hurry, newcomers! It has begun!" the mayor calls.

The others rush up to the creature, but all of them hesitate when it comes down to time to actually do the deed. All except one.

The creature screams and thrashes, his nostrils flaring in fury and pain as someone takes a chunk out of his hemipenes, exposing their spongy interior and unleashing another torrent of blood. You look up to see Alex grinning as that wild-eyed look takes over him, too. His parents rush to hold him back, and one-by-one, each of the newcomers takes his bite.

"Is that everyone?" the mayor asks. "Okay, everyone! Begin!"

They turn you loose, and you rush back to the creature's groin, taking bite after bite out of what's left of his testicle, slurping down the savory, noodle-like fragments and burying your face in his scrotum, quickly biting through the thin membrane that separates his testes and eagerly chomping into the other one.

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You're joined by your family, all of them wild with bloodlust as dozens of mouths of teeth begin feeding on the creature all at once. The creature lashes out, his chains straining as he tries to get away. Blood fills the water, stoking the frenzy even worse. With no testicle left for you to consume, you begin swimming, looking for any free spot on his body. But his body is almost completely obscured by the bodies of the townspeople. His shredded skin floats in ribbons through the water, revealing bleeding muscle underneath. Someone chomps into his side, exposing a rib. Several others begin boring through his ribcage, even gnawing on the bones in their blood-fueled frenzy. The chains jerk violently as the creature lashes about in a vain attempt to get free.

There's a sickening *crunch* as someone bites off one of his toes. The kragath's anguished screams fill the air, rising in pitch and volume. His chest heaves in pain.

"No, not yet!" the mayor cries as he and several attendants rush over to pull someone out of the kragath's stomach. "We want him to suffer as long as possible, remember?"

The person nods and then darts off to go after the kragath's shin and calf instead.

Suddenly, a loud whistle fills the air.

"Stop!" the mayor cries.

The bloodlust comes to an abrupt halt, everybody's eyes wild but all looking at him.

"Try the smelling salts," he says.

Only then do you realize that the creature is not fighting anymore. He's passed out and lying there limply.

Several people swim up to him, carrying a large capsule. Those holding it cover their noses with one hand while another person comes up and breaks the capsule. Its contents are yellow-green and drift towards the creature's nose.

All at once, his eyes snap open, and he begins thrashing about violently again.

"Continue!" the mayor cries jubilantly.

The feeding frenzy begins anew. You swim down to his groin and begin biting at the remnants of his hemipenes. To your surprise, you find them to be very soft and spongy, very easy to bite into, like sucking the airy contents out of a Three Musketeers bar. They offer no resistance at all as you begin boring into his abdomen, dissolving on your tongue like the best-cooked filet mignon. It is dark inside, and you find yourself chewing through the thick, tough skin on his groin to provide more light to see, a striking contrast to the finely textured contents of his genitalia. You can see the muscles that retract and extend his hemipenes and almost instinctively drift towards them, ripping them out, severing the stringy tendons, and devouring them hungrily bite by bite as the creature thrashes around you in the turbulent water. But as you continue to feed, you suddenly realize that he's gone still once more.

The shrill whistle goes up again, and the mayor once again orders everyone to stop feeding. Chunks are missing from his chest, exposing the bone, already picked clean. His arms have large portions of muscle missing, and there are holes in places where he's been completely eaten through. Most of his fingers and toes are missing, nothing but bone remaining while his claws float nearby in the blood-tinged water. His gills have been nearly completely devoured, leaving a big, gaping hole in the sides of his neck. But his eyes are closed, and he's not moving.

"Try the salts," the mayor orders.

Once more, a capsule of smelling salts is brought forward and punctured. But after a few seconds, the kragath is still unconscious.

"Give him adrenaline!" the mayor barks.

All around, there's a feeling of unease: is he gone already? Is the feeding frenzy over?

Several people swim over, two carrying a large autoinjector. A third one swims all the way to the ceiling and then gets a running start and drives his shoulder into the trigger. The autoinjector snaps in, jamming a needle into the creature's chest. For a second, nothing happens, but then the creature's eyes snap

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open, and he gasps in a breath. His body writhes as he once again becomes aware of the agony he's been put through.

The feeding frenzy starts again. Mike goes up to his face, and despite the creature's protests, sinks his teeth into the creature's eyeball and plucks it out. The kragath screams and flails, but with reduced muscle mass and anguish coursing through every vein, his fighting is feeble at best. Mike chomps down on the eyeball, spewing vitreous humor into the water. His eyes bulge as he realizes how delicious it is, and he eagerly sucks up the water nearby, scrambling to get every last drop of the delicious nectar.

"Nope, nope!" the mayor cries as Mike tries to bore into the kragath's eye-socket. "We must make him live as long as possible, newcomer," he says. "More than feeding, this ceremony is about exerting dominance, and we cannot exert dominance over a dead thing."

Hardly hearing him, Mike breaks free and swims quickly around to the other side of the creature, where he sinks his teeth into the creature's other eye, splattering its contents like a cherry tomato in his mouth.

Now blind, the creature can only writhe helplessly, struggling in vain against the onslaught. Alex begins drilling in through his neck, making his way towards the kragath's head. He would tell you later that he wanted to know what kragath tongue tasted like but wasn't about to face off against the creature's teeth.

Once again, the whistle blows, and the frenzy halts once more. The smelling salts and adrenaline are delivered, but without consequence.

"Shock him," the mayor orders. "Everyone, stay back!"

Huge electrodes are connected to the patches of skin that remain on the creature's chest. Everyone moves far back, clearing the stage entirely as you hear the sound of a charging capacitor.

"Clear!" a technician yells.

There's a blinding flash, and the electrodes blow themselves off of the creature. Every muscle in his body—the ones that are left—tenses, and arcs flash between his skin and the shackles that hold him to the stage. The scent of burning flesh reaches your nostrils. Everybody watches with anticipation to see if the creature will revive.

He suddenly coughs, spurring up blood, and his body wracks with painful convulsions. Before the mayor can even say anything, the feast is back on.

Someone finally gets the courage to attack his face and begins biting into his cheeks. In mere seconds, the skin and flesh have been picked from his face, leaving only a screaming, burbling skull. Meanwhile, those around you have breached his abdomen and quickly cleaned it of the skin. They dive into his viscera with gusto while you concentrate on eating his nutrient-rich liver. His organs begin to float in the water with nothing left to hold them in place. They don't remain there long.

"Quick, Son," your mom says, "His heart! Get to his heart before someone else does!"

You glance around and then quickly swim through his ribcage. His heart is about the size of your head. It throbs spastically; his body is shutting down, and it's only a matter of time before the frenzy is over. You must act quickly!

You chomp your teeth into the beating organ. It shivers and throbs in your mouth, driving your teeth in deeper. With a yank backwards, you rip out a chunk of it and swallow. Blood begins gushing from the ventricle, and you hold your mouth over the hole to gorge yourself on the kragath's life-force. Burping in satisfaction, you take another huge chunk out of the kragath's heart, chew it hastily, and swallow.

With a last, desperate wail, the creature's body goes limp. The mayor comes over to survey your handiwork and then shakes his head.

"There is no point to attempting to bring him back again," he says. "He is gone."

There's a mixed feeling of relief, wistfulness, and gravity about the room. Nobody takes even one more bite—to succumb to the desire to eat of a dead creature's flesh would be gluttonous, and as the mayor already explained, this isn't about feeding.

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All at once, everybody grabs onto a piece of the creature. The many chains that hold him are released, and the roof of the auditorium opens up. Everybody pulls his or her weight, lifting the creature into the open sea.

"Look at him," the mayor says loudly enough for everyone to hear. "The pathetic remains of a pathetic species. And to think they ever thought they could master *us*!"

With that, everybody turns and returns home. You were scared at first, but now you can already feel it, that hint of excitement for next year's ceremony.