

THE ANTEDILUVIANS

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ABBY BLACK

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THE 1ST INSTALLMENT OF
THE ANTEdilUVIANS' STORY...

AN ULTIMATE WEAPON meant to end wars is stolen
from a high-security research center, leaving scientists and forensics baffled.

Less than 24 hours later, in a prehistoric valley, tyranny rises from the ashes.

Will persecution and genocide lead to a mass craving of revenge and extinction,
or will enough Squama bridge the gap with honor and charity
SO FREEDOM CAN SOAR?

ABBY BLACK

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ABBY BLACK



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BY
ABBY BLACK



THE ANTEDILUVIANS

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LOCATIONS

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- 6. Harass' Lair

There was a whirring and banging. A single missile streaked out and collided, creating a massive fireball of blue and white flames that belied the missile's inauspicious size. A scarlet laser swept across the land, instantly igniting the already charred trees nearby and setting aflame what was left of the foliage. All life with moveable limbs fled, and most were quickly brought down by another small missile. Those that couldn't escape succumbed to the flames and fell incinerated and lifeless, their hides disfigured. The sky was turned black by the smoke of the fires, and the light was red from the same flames.

It was a scene of absolute desolation, and in the midst of it was the perpetrator; a massive, hulking Acrocanthosaurus, 30 feet tall at the shoulder and 50 feet long from nose to tail. He was built like a small mountain, and had the temper of a vicious snake. He roared in victory at the scene around him, his bellow starting at a low rumble and quickly growing to the volume of nearby thunder, as he gazed at the fires. He was now King of the Squamas. His court would be his Tyrants. No other beings would dare approach him, for on his back was a mastery of amazing foreign weapons, the Annihilator, a box filled to capacity with a rationed supply of missiles and a destructive laser. With the Annihilator, he would rule. He prepared to fire another precious missile; there were none to attack him, so why not show his prowess with such a massive demonstration of destruction?

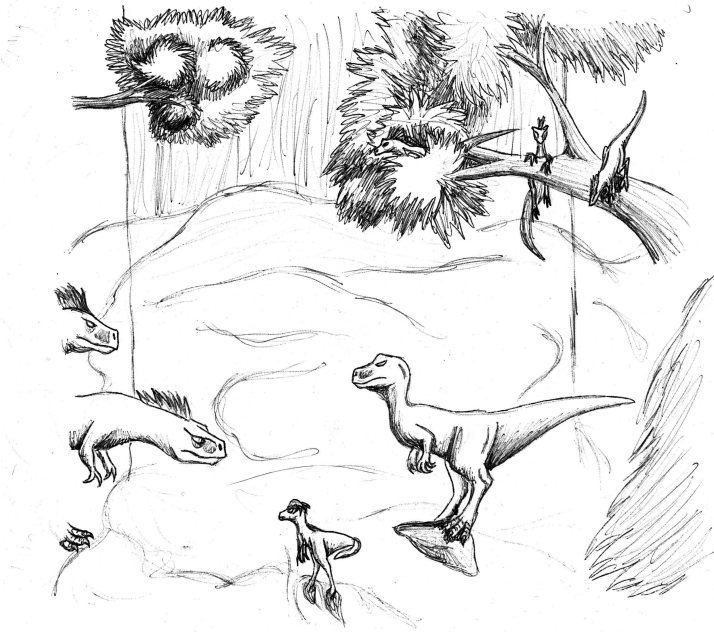
But what was this? Out from a dense sheet of black and red flames leapt a small, young Squama whose hide was a dull yellow ocher in color and oddly lacking in injury, with a defiant expression on its face. He nearly laughed; this little nuisance, a mere mosquito compared to his size, dared to come against him? Why, this skirmish would be nothing more than stepping on the thing. He went to get his feet dirty when he spotted a version of the Annihilator on the defiant bug's shoulders. His laughter died away and was replaced by a growl; this foe was now dangerous. He fired the laser that should slice the tiny irritation cleanly in two, but the young Squama nimbly and quickly leapt aside, and the laser bored a hole in the ground instead.

He growled again; this little tyke was frustratingly agile. So what? A missile should take care of it. He fired, but again, the foe avoided his attack.

He roared in a mixture of frustration and ire. "Stand still!" he snarled, his deep voice sending terrifying bass vibrations through the air. He didn't care to waste his ammunition.

"And be crushed or cooked?" the Squama quipped, the pitch of her voice betraying her youthfulness. "Think again!"

The Acrocanthosaurus was slightly perturbed. Of all the insect Squamas to challenge him, a mere child was the one to do it! "Die, mite!" He fired three missiles in sequence, effectively trapping the foe in a circle of flames. She stood there, stuck, and rose her head to find that she was staring down his glowing and hot missile launcher.



PROLOGUE

Creatures large and small scurried off to hide themselves away, hoping that *they* wouldn't find them. Ever since *they* came, the sun seemed dimmer, the nights longer, and everyone slept uneasily.

A loud, intimidating roar swept over the hills that were illuminated by a glorious setting sun. All creatures within earshot of that dreadful sound covered and rushed to hide in trees, in holes, anyplace that could fit them and conceal them from sight. The roar was closely followed by a second one; it was shriller, but carried every bit of the menace of the first roar.

A small mammalian beast, violently quaking with absolute terror, dared to peer out from beneath the leaves under which it

was buried. Its beady black eyes, full of fright, stared up at two of the largest land carnivores ever to terrorize the earth. Their legs were as thick as grown pine trees and bulged with muscle, their tails dense and capable of toppling a maple. Tiny arms in comparison to the body size gave illusion to being harmless, but those little three-fingered limbs could give nasty gashes if neared. Thick necks led up to oblong heads tipped with gaping maws chock full of sharp serrated teeth. Long ridges ran from the back of their skulls down to the middle of their tails. These terrifying animals were Acrocanthosaurus.

These two diabolical Acrocanthosaurus were known as the King and Queen. Due to a hereditary mutation, the royal family was nearly twice the size of a normal Acrocanthosaurus. The Queen was slightly smaller than the King, and had a Tyrannosaurus rex standing at her hip. The T-rex was carrying a large, ruddy swamp-green egg in its arms. The egg was due to hatch soon, and the hatchling was expected to carry on the reign of terror.

At the thought, the mammalian beast hiding under the leaves shivered even more with insurmountable horror. A Prince or Princess would leave the valley and the neighboring mountains trapped under their tyranny for another generation. This was made worse by the fact that Acrocanthosaurus were notoriously well known for having long life spans; one of them could see 40 White Seasons and still be relatively young.

Its dread was interrupted by the sounds of footfalls in the brush, crushing crackling fallen leaves and loudly snapping twigs. The mammalian looked and saw several dozen Squamas emerging from the forest and moving toward the King and Queen. The newcomers' heads were held low in a gesture of submission as they moved at a brisk trot. What remaining sunlight was left, momentarily highlighted one of them. The mammalian cringed; the newcomers were the King's and Queen's most loyal band of followers called

the Tyrants, a band consisting of the most vile and bloodthirsty Squamas in the region. They milled at the Acrocanthosaurus' feet, showering them with praises and flattery.

"Silence!" the King snarled, and his followers cringed as one. The mammalian almost had a heart attack from the volume and sheer tenacity in the tone. "What news do you bear?"

One of them walked forward and swept her head down in a low bow. "Your Excellency, we've handled the uprising at Concave Peak Mountain."

"Did you kill them?" the King prodded, his scarlet eyes gleaming with malice and excitement. He spoke slowly, as if tasting his words as he said them. "Did you make them plead and *beg* for their pitiful lives to continue?"

"Yes, your Lordship," the follower replied, licking her lips.

"Excellent," the King said, drawing out the word as a hiss of pleasure. "We will *not* tolerate *any* rebellion against us."

"Our realm must be secure for the hatch of my child," the Queen added. "Separate and eliminate anyone you find that even *breathes* a word against us." She snapped her jaw to accentuate her demand. The snap from bone meeting bone caused the poor eaves-dropping mammalian's heart to beat ever faster.

"Yes, O' Queen." All of the Tyrants bowed, nearly scraping their heads on the ground, before splitting into three groups and running off.

The mammalian's eyes widened as one of the groups ran its way. There was no way to avoid them without being seen. As it hurriedly mulled over whether to flee or stay, one of the Tyrants

accidentally stepped on it's back. It involuntarily squeaked in pain, announcing it's presence. Less than two seconds later, the leaves covering the mammalian were swept away. Then, a hungry and salivating maw grasped the mammalian's sides. A crunch later, and the mammalian yipped in agony before becoming eternally still and silent.



The Albertosaurus' nostrils flared as she inhaled the twilight air. Her strong sense of smell captured many scents borne on the breeze. She identified water from the large lake that adorned the center of her valley home a few miles away, a herd of Ankylosaurus taking a cautious and quick return to their somewhat safe nightly dwelling, and then a sharp, nasty scent that harshly struck her sensitive nose.

"They're back," she murmured under her breath. She whirled around and quickly moved to a clearing. In it was a myriad of species of Squamas, consisting of brave Stygimolochs, Troodons, other Albertosaurus, and several other species that could fare well in a bloody fight.

She weaved through their midst, carefully stepping over the smaller Squamas and sidestepping the rest. She was heading toward the center of the mass, where an Allosaurus going by the name of Grit stood. He was a large brute for his species, but smaller than she. He made up for his lack of size by being brave and voracious. As far as anyone knew, Grit was one of the last of his species; the King's and Queen's ferocious acolytes had managed to slay all of the Allosaurus that hadn't already fled the valley.

She arrived at her destination and showed her respect to Grit by bending her head so that, if the Allosaurus wished, he had an unhindered path to her jugular. "Sir, I have dire news."

“What kind of news?” Grit replied instantly, his fiery orange eyes narrowing in concern.

“The King and Queen,” she responded, spitting their names like they were a vile poison on her tongue. “They’ve returned from their trip to the mountains.”

Grit’s nose wrinkled, his lips peeling back to show his sharp teeth, in a silent growl. “Then gather together the Defiance band to the east. We *cannot* allow them to continue ruling over our lives with their tyranny.”

She nodded and prepared to give the signal, which was a loud, guttural roar and three shorter, shriller ones. But no sooner had she inhaled when the wind carried a faint, shrill screech. All noise in the group immediately silenced, and then they could hear the last echoes of the screech, which was soon followed by four shorter but equally shrill screeches.

Grit hung his head, and he was mimicked by everyone else. The five screeches meant that the Defiance band to the east had fallen. A pact had been made with the pterosaurs in that area: The pterosaurs wouldn’t be eaten, and they would notify them of any ill outcomes; in this case, the annihilation of the Defiance band.

“We can’t call for them any longer,” Grit said, then, snarled and snapped at the air in frustration. He stood and shouted, “Attention! We are now the last standing force of the Defiance of the Tyrants. We cannot wait a moment longer. We must search out the King and Queen, and destroy them in order to free our valley and the surrounding lands. *Their reign ends tonight! Move out!*”

The Troodons stamped their feet and screeched. They were soon joined by other Squamas, and soon there was a strange symphony of earth-shaking thuds and screeching. The sounds rose to

the sky and reverberated throughout the earth. It was loud and easily showed their location; so, it only lasted a short while before they stopped abruptly and disappeared into the trees.

On that unforgettable night, the remaining party of the Defiance was executing a final, last-ditch effort against the King and Queen.

The Albertosaurus took the lead, her nose sniffing the air for the sharp, pungent scent of the Acrocanthosaurus. She was joined by three other scent-sensitive scouts who were also using the air to find the King, Queen, and their Tyrants. The group quickly made their way through the dark forest, skirting around trees, but not bothering to avoid flattening the low shrubbery. Any creatures that were not part of their group wisely scurried out of their way.

The Albertosaurus halted suddenly, smelling something new. She raised her muzzle to the sky and inhaled deeply. She recognized the scent; it was one that was a constant smell around hatching grounds and nests during the birthing Green Season.

The group had stopped seconds after she had, and looking around cautiously. One of them stepped forward and asked quietly, “What is it?”

“Do any of you smell that?” she asked at the same volume.

Several of her comrades sniffed the air. “Egg mucus,” one remarked.

“Exactly,” she said. “It’s the middle of the Colors Season. Tell me, whose egg is left to be hatched this far into the Turn?”

An eerie quiet immediately came upon the group as they concurrently came to the same disheartening conclusion.

“It’s hatched.”

And now their pace quickened. There was no time to waste; they *had* to get rid of the King, Queen, and now their newly hatched offspring before the land had to bear another great many Turns of tyranny.



Bright crimson eyes, glistening with life and promise, gazed up at the new world. It had been so very dark and cramped, but now it was a little brighter and he could finally stretch out. He tried to stand, but his stout little legs were unable to bear his weight quite yet, and he immediately fell onto his chin. He squeaked at the sudden change in perspective.

He realized that he was being watched, and he looked up. The first things he saw were six huge nostrils. Looking further, he saw there were three huge heads hovering over him, watching him with really big red eyes. Frightened, he cringed away. His fear was slightly alleviated when one of the large heads began making a low guttural sound that he could feel in his bones. The noise calmed him, and he crooned. He shuffled closer to the head making the sound.

An instinct reared up from deep within him. The one making the sound was Mother. She would take care of him. He trusted her already, and he hadn’t even been out of his shell for two minutes.

And then, suddenly, there were more sounds, sharper ones, louder ones. He curled up into a scared little ball as many large forms burst from the dark around him. The three heads above pulled back, making angry roars at the newcomers.

He keened in fright, unable to speak but more than able to convey what he wanted by noise. *Mother! I need comfort! What's going on? I'm scared!* was the gist of his screams.

No one answered his pleas.

Noise. Screeches of pain. More than once, something dark, warm, and wet was dribbled on him. He was harshly moved around by various bodies via accidental kicks that were always mere inches away from crushing him. And then *pain*. Pain all the way down the right side of his face, just barely under his eye. Something warm was now coming out of it, streaming down his cheek and neck. He screeched, partly in agony and partly for help. What kind of horrible world had he entered into; it hurt! He wanted to be back in his shell, where it was safe!

Suddenly, he was sharply picked up by the scruff of his neck. The skin and membraned spines located there stretched to uncomfortable limits. He writhed and squirmed in the tight grip, fearing more pain. But a soft rumble above him made him look up. One of the three heads, the smallest, was there. It must be carrying him away from the pain, because the horrible sounds were fading away.

No, new roars were growing louder. He heard many fast steps coming after them. They roared at his rescuer's tail. He cringed and curled up as much as he could. Thankfully, his rescuer was faster than their pursuers, and soon the only noise were his rescuer's footfalls.

His rescuer ran throughout the night until sunrise came, and even then they didn't stop until they reached a wall of cascading water. His rescuer carried him through the water and entered a damp and glistening cavern.

As he was put down, he crooned and shrieked. Where was

his mother? He still hurt, but the pain had turned into a throbbing as the light came. He was also getting hungry. Why wasn't his mother answering? He eventually curled up into a ball and put his head under his tail, careful to avoid touching the throbbing side of his face. At least the wound had stopped bleeding. This was a *terrible* world he had come into. He keened and began to cry, large tears sliding down his cheeks and harshly stinging the one.



They were victorious!

The King and Queen laid dead at their feet, nevermore to reign. They were free from tyranny! As one, they reared back their heads and roared a victory cry into the sky.

Grit suddenly stopped roaring as a realization popped into his mind. He looked around. "Wait. . ." he muttered, narrowing his eyes.

"What is it, Grit?" someone next to him said with a huge grin. "We've won!"

Grit turned and inquired quietly, "Then where's the hatchling and the Tyrannosaurus?"

As if he had yelled the question, the jubilant roaring ceased, as the silence spread out from him as if he was the epicenter of an earthquake. A deathly quiet dropped upon the group as they also realized that the hatchling and the T-rex were missing and not among the dead.

"Find them!" Grit yelled in desperation.



The T-Rex and the Prince remained missing for five White Seasons. The Defiance scoured the valley, valiantly searching for any clue as to their whereabouts. They shifted their search when they received a report from a far corner of the valley, where the herbivore population had declined.

Another White Season had come and gone before a Triceratops youngling came dashing from the forest seemingly from nothing but thin air, frantically pushing through the gathered masses of the Defiance, and throwing himself at Grit's feet. Grit looked down at the youngling with concern; the Triceratops was breathing hard and it was painfully obvious that he had been running for some time.

Grit patiently waited for the youngling to catch his breath before inquiring, "What's the matter, little one?"

"Attack!" the youngling whimpered. "Mother and I were at the edge of the herd feeding, and we saw the Tyrannosaurus and the Prince you're after in a thicket! Mother called the alarm, and they started to attack, so Mother told me to run for help. I ran and ran until I found you."

Grit growled, then faced his comrades. "Favor is on our side. Our patience and perseverance have paid off."

"Canter, take care of the youngling. The rest of you, we will hunt them down!" Taking a breath, he roared into the sky.

The other Squamas roared with him, following him into the forest. Grit kept the lead, following the trails at a brisk run that ate up the ground. They made a massive thundering as they went, but Grit didn't mind it this time. They knew where to begin looking for the royal offspring and its guardian, and Grit was determined not to lose them.

When they reached the area that the Triceratops had been, they stopped. It was in the middle of the forest, and it sounded like there was a waterfall not far away. This area was definitely the place the youngling had described, as there were large bloody carcasses of adult Triceratops lying in the midst of trampled ground and broken trees. It was a gruesome sight that made many of the onlookers feel ill; what could possess someone to heartlessly murder an entire herd of Triceratops without even partaking of any of the meat?

Grit lowered his head and sniffed at a vivid print in the dirt, a print that was disturbingly almost twice the size of his own.

His lips retracted enough to show two lines of interlocking canines when he identified the stench that was rising from the print. “We have Tyrannosaurus,” he told the others. He plodded to a smaller print and sniffed it. Almost immediately, he recoiled and snorted harshly. “There’s no mistaking that miasma. My friends, we have found the royal offspring.”

Those with keen noses began sniffing for any sign of the rogues. The trail was soon found, and was followed to a waterfall that emptied into a river. The air was absolutely saturated with fine mist, and any sign of the trail was gone.

“They must’ve fled into the river and used it to lose us,” a Troodon said, peering downstream.

Grit pursed his lips and squinted through the mist. He gingerly stepped into the river, careful not to slip on the slick, damp rocky bed. He tried to tune out the sounds of his comrades and focused on the waterfall. Looking at the heavy sheet of water, he could see where it was bouncing off of rocks. He noted where the water changed color depending on where the stones were behind it.

Then he spotted the discoloration. Taking a step closer to

the oddity, he saw that the water was murky over a tall but rather thin section. He pushed his hand through the water and expected to hit rock, but found nothing but open air behind the water. He retracted his hand, and decided to cautiously poke his head through.

The first thing he saw was that there was a wet cave behind the waterfall. The second thing he noticed was a clawed hand coming straight for his face. Only by reflex did he manage to avoid having an eye gouged out.

“They’re behind the waterfall!” he shouted as he dropped into a combat stance. He roared a battle cry and lunged into the waterfall.

With water cascading over his tail and spraying everywhere, he saw that the formerly missing T-rex was waiting for him. The T-rex growled and attacked. Grit easily avoided the slashing teeth and countered with a few kicks and a swipe with a clawed hand. Grit had to retreat several steps when his much larger opponent charged. The T-rex tackled him, knocking them both out of the cave and into the open. Grit was immediately assisted by his comrades, and the T-rex soon realized his mistake. Not a minute after the tackle, the T-rex was pinned to the ground with several large Squamas holding him down.

“Where is the hatchling?” Grit demanded of the T-rex.

“Hiding, just like I taught him to do if a situation like this ever happened,” the T-rex replied snappily, his jaw scraping against the rocks on the shore of the river because a Stygimoloch was holding down his head.

“Where is the hatchling?” Grit slowly repeated, narrowing his eyes.

“I’ll never tell you,” the T-rex growled. “He is the Prince and the future King! I’m loyal to him and him alone. I’ll *never* tell you where he is.”

Grit snarled and snapped his jaw angrily, and then had a small hunch as to the location of the Prince. With a few steps, he passed through the waterfall. He carefully stepped along the glistening wet stone of the cave, sniffing the air. Amongst the heavy mist and the overwhelming scent of water, he smelled another creature. He peered into dark and shadowed corners, and it wasn’t until he reached the very back of the cave did he find his quarry, who had crammed himself into a narrow crack.

The Prince stared up at him with terrified crimson orbs. “Who are you?” he squeaked, trying to make himself impossibly smaller than he already was.

Grit’s eyes narrowed as he stepped to the side to effectively block the youngling’s way to the exit. The Prince was almost as large as a Stygimoloch, and for a being that was only six Winter Seasons old, Grit had a frightening idea of how large the Prince would be when he was fully grown.

Still cringing, the Prince added, “Are you going to hurt me?”

Grit bared his teeth, and the youngling twitched. “It depends. Now, I’m going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer it honestly. Understand?”

The Prince nodded.

“Good. My question is; If I bare my neck to you, what will your reaction be?” The youngling’s life depended on his answer.

After blinking, the Prince said, “I don’t know. Isn’t baring

the neck a sign of submission?”

It was Grit’s turn to blink in surprise. “What did the Tyrannosaurus tell you about your parents?”

“He said that I would know next Turn.”

Unexpectedly, Grit found himself thinking compassionately. “I believe you,” he said, “and for honestly giving me your answer, I won’t kill you. Instead, I want you to *run*. Run like a scared rodent who has seen a pterosaur. If you are *ever* seen again in this valley and its surrounding mountains, you are going to be killed.” Grit stepped to the side, allowing a clear passage to the exit. “Run, youngling.”

The Prince scrambled to his feet and ran for the exit. He burst through the water. Grit followed suit and saw a few Troodons starting to run after the Prince.

“Leave him!” Grit ordered, and the Troodons stopped. “He’s been banished; but if he is ever seen again in this valley or the surrounding mountains, he must be immediately killed.” Grit snorted harshly, then stalked over to the pinned T-rex. “Why didn’t you tell him of his heritage?” Grit demanded to know.

“Would you want some youngling ordering *you* around?” the T-rex huffed in reply. “The kid was asking too many questions about his mother and patriarch. Telling him to wait till his next Turn shut him up nicely.”

“You don’t seem to care that the Prince to whom you profess your loyalty just ran off with his tail between his legs, *all by himself*, without any protection at all,” Grit said, then snorted. “Some loyalty you have for him.”

“He can survive for himself. You don’t think that I spent all of those six Turns doing all of the hunting, do you?”

Grit snarled at the pinned Squama. “You’re a despicable beast.” And with that, Grit swept his claws through the T-rex’s throat. Less than a minute later, the T-rex had perished.

Rinsing his hand in the river, Grit looked off at the section of trees where the Prince was last seen. “Our valley has been spared of the tyranny of the King and Queen. But was it a mistake for me to merely banish their Prince?”



CHAPTER ONE

If any of the scientists working on their latest representation of middle 21st Century technology warfare knew that one of their greatest weapon creations would end up in the sinister grasp of one of the most terrifying creatures ever to place a step on the Earth, they would've laughed and shrugged it off.

After all, they worked in a private arms development research facility. Their facility included top-notch security at multiple levels.

Saying, "Goodnight," to the armed guards posted near the lab door, the scientists left for the night, leaving their completed prototype in the lab.

In the morning, the scientists returned to find their brain-child had completely vanished. The guards reported that no one had gone through the door. Security was called to review the camera footage to determine what happened.

It turned out that it wasn't a who, but a what, that had made off with the weapon. Long after the scientists had retired for the night, the cameras had displayed the formation of a mysterious hole which appeared near one of the far walls of the laboratory. The hole would've been invisible except that the air around it rippled like disturbed water. Shortly after the hole formed, out of it came an actual *dinosaur*. A lanky, ostrich-like dinosaur had been flung out of the hole, landed on its side with a heavy bump, and skidded to a stop on the smooth metal floor. For a moment, it just laid there, apparently stunned, before it slowly used its forearms to push itself to its feet. It had wobbled for a second, shook its head, before steadying.

Initially, it had looked around at the hole, then around the room. The creature made an intrigued sound as its jaw moved and the throat fluxed. There was a simultaneous intake of air amongst the scientists watching the video when the dinosaur focused its attention on the prototype and reached out to touch its shiny surface. After walking around the table a few times, the dinosaur reached out again with both arms and hefted the weapon off of the table. It lowered its head so that it could view the weapon from all angles, and turned back toward the hole.

“No!” one of the scientists pleaded with the video.

The dinosaur, shifting the weapon in its arms to ensure a better grip, walked back to the hole. After poking it with its tail, it stiffened and then disappeared. The hole quivered, then vanished by imploding on itself.

Stunned, the scientists stared at the now empty room

through the cameras. They all looked at each other.



The Struthiomimus had been experimenting with a few selections of rocks, striking them against each other. Pleased, he had recently discovered that some rocks would scratch others but not be scratched themselves, and he wondered why. On a large slab of stone was a rock that he had yet to be able to leave a scratch on. He thought it the prettiest with the way it refracted light, casting rainbows of color on the walls and floor of his cave.

He looked up toward the entrance of his laboratory. The entrance was a long tunnel linking his cave to the outside world. Sniffing the air with his sensitive nose, he searched for any hints of danger. He could never be too careful.

He lived by the saying, “You can’t judge the taste of a dragonfly by how it looks.” It paid to be cautious, no matter the species.

The light was growing dimmer in his cave. Looking behind him, he saw that the fires keeping the cave from becoming enshrouded by darkness were growing low. Reluctantly, he left his stones and shoved an appropriate amount of wood fuel into the flames. He checked the pipes leading to a crack in the ceiling. The pipes went all the way to the surface, releasing the smoke there. Those pipes were his pride and joy, and it wouldn’t do for them to leak the smoke that could fill the cave and suffocate him and. . .

He stopped that thought; he didn’t want to admit that he was paranoid. Seeing that the ventilation was working fine, he returned to his stones.

A few of his assistants were out gathering more rock variet-

ies. He made a mental note to make sure that they weren't secretly double-agents intending to assassinate him and sell his findings. *Just in case*, he reminded himself. *My works are pure genius. Many would pay handsome amounts of the finest meat for my work.*

Refocusing his mind on the task at hand, he struck a strange luminescent blue stone against the shiny stone to see if he could finally mar the shiny stone's flawless surface. Bright green sparks soared from the point of contact and flew behind him. He turned to follow their paths, just in case they alit the stockpile of firewood. As the sparks landed on the rocky floor of the cave, the air made a strange snap and crackle noise, and he saw the peculiar sight of the air fluctuating from around a circle of undisturbed air. Despite his paranoia- no, *overzealous sense of self-preservation* shouting in his mind, his curiosity consumed him, and he stuck his head in the hole.

The next thing he knew, the hole had sucked him in. He screeched, more out of surprise than pain, when he felt as if his entire body and mind were being stretched. Briefly, his five senses vanished abruptly, leaving him feeling as if he was suspended in nothing at all. Just as he was thinking, *Is this how the pterosaurs feel?* he was flung into an open space. He tripped on the ground, then fell onto his side. Stunned, he laid still for a moment before he tried to rise to his feet. He wobbled from lack of balance, but quickly recovered his equilibrium by violently shaking his head from side to side.

Finally able to focus, he peered around at his new surroundings. Much to his relief, the hole was behind him and still open, but for how much longer he didn't know, and he didn't want to find out what would happen if it closed before he could go through again. He was apparently in a space similar to his cave, but the walls, floor, and ceiling were astonishingly smooth, shiny, and unmarred. The space was lit by some strange kind of fire, one that hung high on

the wall, created a white light, but emitted no semblance of heat. Something glinted in the corner of his vision, and he turned to face the source.

His eyes widened as educated curiosity surged through his mind. “Amazing,” he muttered, moving to the object that had caught his attention. It had an extraordinarily shiny surface, even more interesting than the strange stone back in his cave that couldn’t be scratched. He reached out with a hand to touch it, careful to not scar the surface with his sharp, pointed talons. It was the smoothest item he had ever felt underneath the thin leathery skin of his fingertips.

Overwhelmed, he walked around the object, viewing it from all angles in order to learn more. It was mainly a rounded rectangular shape with small cylinders sprouting out from the sides. He wondered what it could do, and decided that it would be best to bring it back to the cave for further inspection. Carefully, oh so carefully, he picked it up. It was surprisingly light in weight, and easily handled. He walked over to the hole, then paused, thinking about how he got sucked in the last time. He turned so that he could stick his tail in, as if to test the waters; the tip vanished and he lost all sense of touch, but nothing else happened. Figuring that nothing bad would happen on his trip back, he stepped through the hole.

The numbness returned, along with the stretching sensation. He patiently awaited for his exit from the void, ignoring the quiet panic in the back of his mind. He found himself back in his familiar cave. The hole behind him closed with a final *snap*, and it was as if the anomaly had never been there in the first place.

He exhaled, feeling much better now back in familiar surroundings. He felt the comforting heat from the fire, and smelt the burning wood. With the light from the flames, he looked around.

This was a space to which he was accustomed, and he had no plans of abandoning it.

Placing his new object onto the table, he made a mental note to add some more fuel to the stockpile; his firewood was almost gone again. He wasn't all that comfortable venturing outside, where there were many threats and dangers. That's why he had several Microvenators to do the "dangerous" work, also known as the tedious errands.

Speaking of them, where are they? At his wondering thought, his paranoia supplied a suggestion that they were contacting someone in order to betray him. He strived to ignore it. His Microvenators wouldn't do that. . . *Would they?*

His sensitive hearing picked up the sound of someone pushing aside the vines that hid the entrance to his cave. Immediately, he tensed and took up a defensive position in front of his stones and the object. Hopefully, the combat training he received from a band of friendly Troodons would suffice. He sniffed the air to see who it was.

It turned out to be one of his Microvenators. He relaxed his posture just as she entered. She held several more rocks in her arms, the three fingers on each of her hands keeping the rocks from falling. "Here you are, Sir," the Microvenator said, placing the rocks as best she could on the slab of stone with the others. "I've found different kinds this time." Her crown of spines constantly twitched as she spoke, a trait he found almost twee.

"Thank you, Spines," the Struthiomimus said, gently pushing the shiny object aside to look at the new samples. He peered at them closely.

Spines took a few steps around him so that she could see the

object. It was slightly difficult for her to see it because the top of the table was at her head level. “Excuse me, Sir,” Spines said, looking at the object, “but what’s that you have there?”

“This?” the Struthiomimus said, gazing at the object. He thought for a moment before continuing. “I have no idea. A hole appeared in thin air, and I went through it to this most *intriguing* place. This thing was there on an impeccably smooth slab of a material I have never before seen. Since I wanted to learn more about the object, I brought it back here.”

“Where’s the hole, Sir?” Spines inquired, looking around the cave.

“It closed behind me.”

Spines reluctantly stopped looking around and returned to peer at the object. “What does it do?”

The Struthiomimus shrugged, at a loss for an answer. “I have no idea. Perhaps you could go and bring the others, and we could all find out together.”

Spines nodded eagerly. “Yes, Sir!” she said before turning and jogging off toward the exit tunnel.

The Struthiomimus turned to the retreating Microvenator. “Spines, be sure to get more oak and locust wood. The cave will plunge into darkness soon when the stockpile expires.”

“Yes, Sir!” came the enthusiastic chirping reply that echoed down the tunnel. Yes, she was a twee little thing. He might even consider her his favorite assistant.

The Struthiomimus looked back to the object he had ac-

quired. He tapped it with the rounded part of his talon as to not cause any scratches. He leapt back in surprise when the object hummed softly and quietly, but the sound stopped as suddenly as it began when his talon ceased touching it. Gingerly, he stroked the object again, but this time with the palm of his hand. Surprisingly, nothing happened.

Footsteps could be heard coming back down the tunnel. Instantly sniffing the air, he identified several of his assistants. He turned his head and saw that it was Spines, along with a few other Microvenators. Each of them carried an armful of wood, which they spread among the fading piles, and added the remainder to the stockpile in the corner. The amount of light in the cave, which had been slowly growing dimmer with the lack of fuel, increased greatly; and the Struthiomimus found that he could see much better.

“Spines said that you needed our assistance,” said a Microvenator, looking up to him like a child finding a friend.

“Indeed,” said the Struthiomimus seriously, looking back down with an expression far from the one being given to him. “But first I must ask you all, Did any of you see anyone following you?”

The Microvenators looked at each other, then shook their heads in unison. “No, Sir,” one of them said. “We did our best not to be seen.”

“Did you disguise the entrance?” the Struthiomimus pressed.

“Yes,” answered another.

“Good.” The Struthiomimus faced the object and motioned to it. “This is our new project,” he said to his assistants. “Our goal is to find out how it works. I have already discovered that it makes

a droning noise when touched a certain way, but I want to know *exactly* how this works.”

“Yes, Sir!” his aides said.



They worked on the mysterious object well into the night, only pausing because the wood piles needed to be refueled. As the Struthiomimus had no intention of himself going to get fuel, he chose a Microvenator called Kicker.

The Struthiomimus was beginning to become dismayed. So far, only more questions had risen, and no answers discovered.

In addition, Kicker was absent far longer than expected. The light was rapidly dimming; and the Struthiomimus was becoming edgy at being left in the dark. His senses of hearing and smell were quite great, but his eyesight was limited.

I really need to practice seeing in this low light, he thought as he had to harshly squint in order to see his work. “Where is Kicker?” he finally said, looking around irritably. “My eyes are starting to ache from the strain.”

“He hasn’t come back yet,” said a Microvenator.

“I can tell,” the Struthiomimus said with a sigh. “So, where is he?” Suddenly, a sharp, metallic scent hit his nostrils. His eyes widened in shock as he identified the scent.

“Sir!” came a panicked shout that echoed down the tunnel.

All heads turned to face the voice coming down the tunnel.

Kicker stumbled into view, greatly favoring his right leg which was leaving bloody footprints on the ground. Blood streamed down his shoulders, legs, and neck. He had two jagged tears in his hide down the side of his face and across where his left eye should be.

“Kicker!” Spines yelped in alarm as the others shied away. “What happened to you?”

“Tyrannosaurus!” Kicker said urgently, wavering unsteadily on his feet. “And Coelurus!” He coughed violently, spraying droplets of blood across the floor. “They followed me back and attacked me!”

“How long do we have?” the Struthiomimus asked, moving to place himself between the object and the tunnel. He could smell them now; the Coelurus had very bitter scents, ones of malicious intents and pasts; the trait seemed to pass from generation to generation, sadly enough. The Coelurus were close. Uncomfortably close.

Kicker started to reply, but suddenly there was a shrill screeching from the tunnel, and Kicker froze in terror, then collapsed in a heap. A dangerously beautiful crimson red and aquamarine blue Coelurus was on his back, one elegantly clawed foot on the now dead Microvenator’s neck.

“Intel,” the Coelurus said sinisterly, her yellow eyes glinting with vindication. She slowly swung her long, stiff tail from side to side in obvious anticipation and glee. “Give me the object you are hiding, and my master might just let you live.”

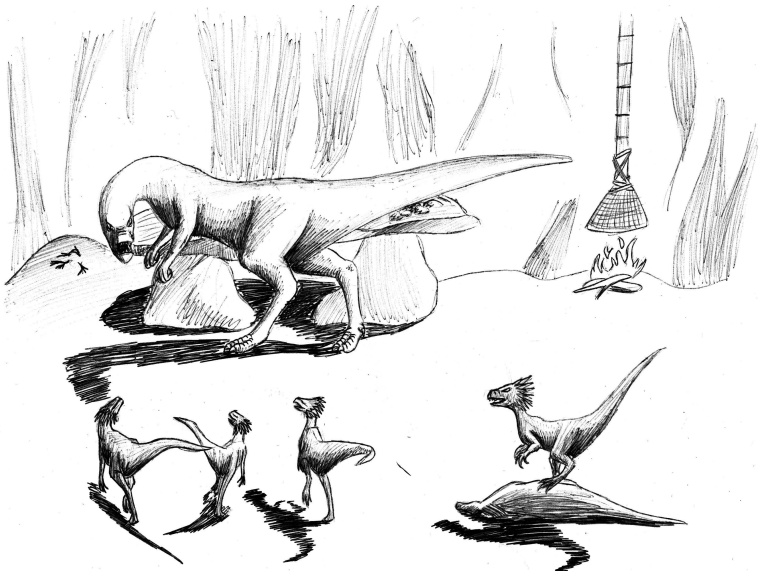
Intel did not have the inborn skills of a carnivore, but he *had* studied their skills from the Troodons. Hopefully, the training would be enough. “I will *never* let you nor your kind get this,” he spat.

Spines and the others had crowded into a corner of the cave, all of them huddled together and shivering in fright. Spines was closest to the Coelurus, and tried to cover her quivering brethren as best as she could with her body.

The Coelurus cackled as she stepped off of Kicker. The crown of bright scarlet horns on her skull gleamed in the diminishing firelight, reminding him of fresh red roses. “Wrong answer,” she hissed, then gathered her legs beneath her and lunged.

The Struthiomimus met her in the middle of her leap by twisting his body around and swatting her with his somewhat flexible tail. She grunted as she was knocked aside, stumbling a few steps before regaining her balance and leapt again at his unguarded haunches. This time, Intel had no time to cover his vulnerable side, and the Coelurus latched herself onto his body, her claws drawing blood.

He screamed in pain and writhed, but his movements only made her claws deepen.



Now that the intruder was occupied, the Microvenators took the chance to make a mad dash down the tunnel. Spines brought up the rear, pausing in her flight to look helplessly at Intel before resuming her run, and they all vanished down the tunnel.

“Get off!” Intel snarled, bending his neck around and biting the hide of his tormentor. Keeping his teeth clenched around her shoulders, he twisted his neck around and flung her away. She landed on her back and rolled several paces, only stopping when she struck a wall.

The Coelurus displayed a frightening grin as she rose to her feet. “You will pay for that,” she said, growling. She took a deep breath, faced the tunnel, then screeched at the top of her lungs.

Intel growled, pawing at his ears as the shrill noise pierced them. The sound reverberated around the cave and in his head, giving him an acute headache. When the screech finally died a few seconds after it started, he retained his gaze on the Coelurus, his ears still ringing.

Something small slammed into his side from the direction of the tunnel, causing him to stumble. He turned his head to see six more Coelurus emerging from the tunnel, one on his side, and the first still stood on the other side of the cave.

“Get the object,” the first Coelurus said to them.

“No!” Intel yelled, quickly throwing the foe on his side away and dashing to get to the object.

But he was too late. Two Coelurus reached it before he, roughly grabbed the object, and carried it off. The rest swarmed him, plaguing him with their talons, claws, and sharp teeth until they took him down. He roared in pain as their lethal talons drove

into his skin. His vision started fading, he couldn't tell if it was because of the bits of wood burning out, or if he himself was falling into unconsciousness.

"Leave him!" the female *Coelurus* said, her voice sounding oddly distant and echoing. "The blood loss will finish him off soon enough. Let's get the object to our master."

The *Struthiomimus* groaned, then succumbed to the darkness.



Intel's body ached. He moaned softly, shifting his head, and his cheek scraped on the rough stone. He tried to see, but he had either been blinded or the wood piles had burned themselves out. Rolling onto his stomach, he bit back a cry from his tender wounds. He slowly managed to gather his legs beneath him and attempted to rise to his feet. He couldn't; he was too weak.

"Sir!" he heard someone say. Quiet, but quick, footsteps approached him; and he sensed a body next to his.

"Spines?" Intel asked, feeling his knees dangerously shaking. He shifted his weight to steady his body before his knees could give. "What happened?"

"You've lost a lot of blood, Sir, I was worried that you were going to bleed out," Spines said softly. "I managed to stop it. You've been coming in and out of consciousness for *forever*, Sir." He felt small hands on his sides, and winced away from them. "Do you think that you can handle some food?"

"Where's the object?"

“The intruders left with it. I know not where they took it.”

“Where are the other Microvenators?”

Spines sighed sadly. “They were ambushed, Sir. The Tyrannosaurus mentioned by Kicker killed them.”

“How did you escape their fate?” the Struthiomimus asked. *Yes, how, Spines? Were you spared because of some shady reason?*

“I lagged behind while everyone was running ahead,” she said. “They exited the cave before I did; and then I had enough warning. They screamed that there were Tyrannosaurus outside. I managed to stop before I emerged and got into a crack in the wall of the tunnel. I stayed there until they all left. I came back here just before the wood burned out.”

So, I am not blind, Intel thought in relief. “How long was I out?”

“Not long. They all left before the light came back, and the moon is coming back out in a bit.”

The Struthiomimus narrowed his eyes at the darkness. “We must find another hole. I need to go through it and recover another similar object.”

“Can you walk, Sir?” Spines asked.

“No. Continue bringing me food. I will stay here until I can move.”

“Yes, Sir.”



The darkness of the cave made Intel oblivious to the time of day. He slowly recovered, gathering his strength. Finally, he informed Spines that he was ready.

“Are you sure, Sir?” she asked.

“I believe so,” the Struthiomimus said. “Lead me outside.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Intel felt Spines touch him, and he followed her down the tunnel.

The tunnel gradually grew lighter, and the exit eventually came into view. There was a thick curtain of lush, leafy vines covering up the exit, illuminated from the other side by a pale, gentle blue light of the moon. Spines went ahead and poked her head through the vines.

“All clear, Sir,” she called back. “The view’s not pleasant, though.”

“I will survive the scene,” Intel replied.

Spines pulled aside an armful of vines, giving the Struthiomimus a clear exit. Intel limped through, then winced from the sight that greeted him. All of the other Microvenators laid prone on the ground, dead. Only one dead Coelurus was present, and Intel mentally congratulated the one who had killed it.

Intel looked down at Spines, then blinked. “You are injured.”

His lone assistant looked at her shoulder and rotated the joint. On her shoulder was a long scrape that had torn her rough skin. It was still tender. “Oh. The crevice was really tight. And terri-

bly jagged.”

The Struthiomimus sighed softly.

“Where do you think that we can find another hole, Sir?” Spines asked.

“I don’t know,” the Struthiomimus replied. He thought back to what he had been doing when the hole had first appeared. “Spines, do you recall where the luminescent blue stone and the shiny stone were found?”

Spines nodded. “Yes, Sir. The shiny one was found in a pit about fifty paces that way, and the luminescent one was found imbedded into the rock just behind you.”

Intel turned and peered closely at the rock that surrounded the tunnel. A stream of blue coursed through the rock, and he used another rock to pick at the stream. The rock around the other fell apart ridiculously easy, and he soon held a luminescent blue stone in his hand.

“Take me to the pit,” he ordered Spines.

Thankfully, it was a short distance. Intel was relieved that it didn’t take very long. The pit was halfway disguised by a bunch of ferns that draped over its rim. Spines led the way to a hidden path, then descended down it. Once they were down at the bottom, Spines scrambled over to a corner of the pit, dug around with her feet, and used her mouth to pick up a rock.

“Here you are, sir,” Spines said, carrying the rock to Intel and dropping it into his hand.

The Struthiomimus held the rock up to the sky for the

moonlight to illuminate, then looked at the luminescent blue rock. He racked his mind for how he summoned the hole. He spread his arms, then struck them both together.

From the point of collision sprang green sparks which danced spectacularly through the air before landing on the ground. From where they landed, the air immediately crackled, and behind them appeared another hole. Again, the air rippled and shook around the anomaly.

“Sir?” Spines murmured uneasily as she eyed the hole, which was rippling intensely.

Intel walked toward the hole, placing the two rocks on the ground. “Come, Spines,” he said.

“Is it safe, sir?” she asked, edging toward it with sideways steps.

Intel turned to face his last assistant. “I myself went through one of these and came back. Do you see anything wrong with me?”

Spines paused, then slowly shook her head.

“Then come. We should go through and back without incident.”

The Microvenator hesitated, but jogged to Intel’s side. Together, they stepped into the hole.