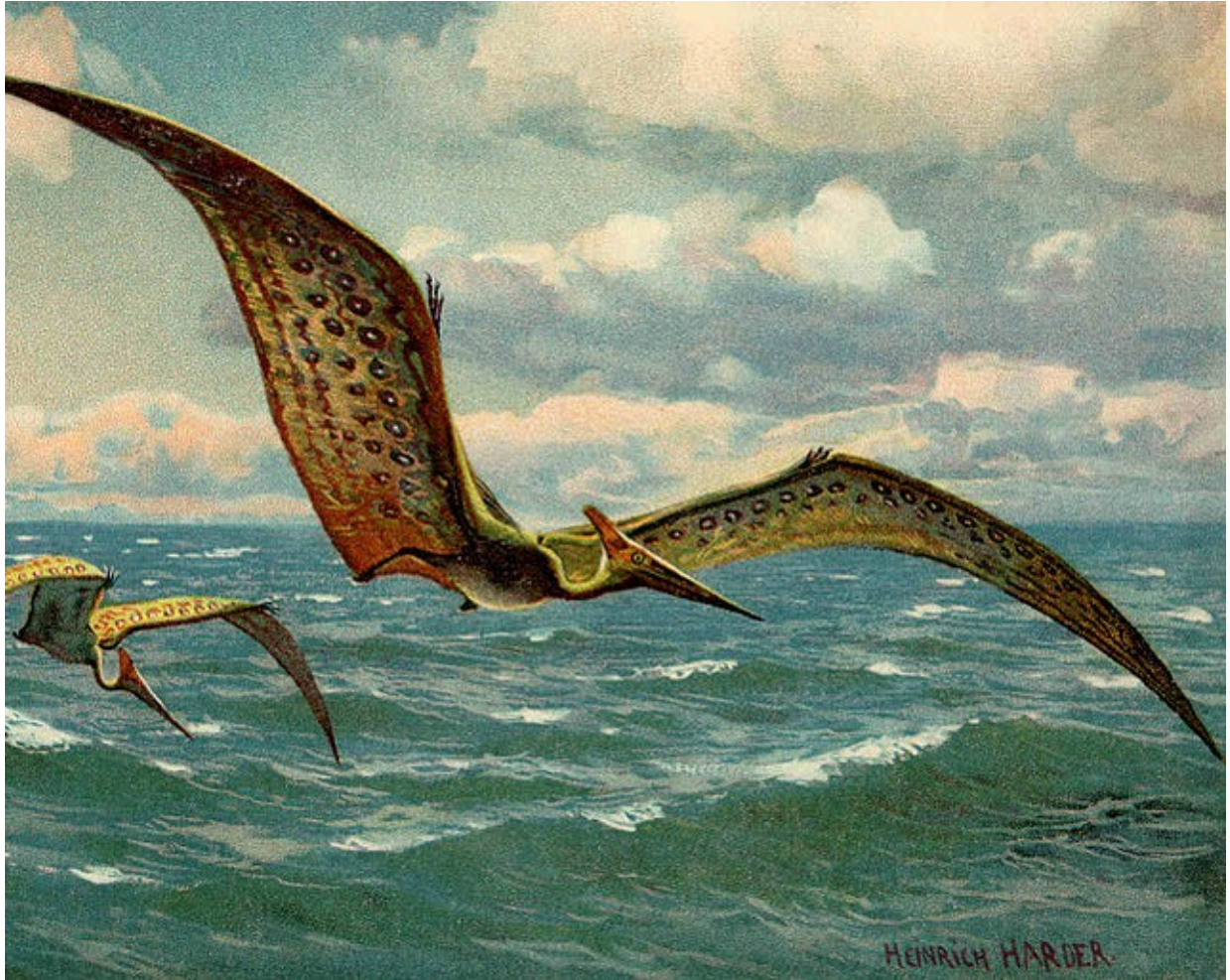


PANSAURIA FALLEN



Theodore Xavier

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Chapter I: The Vicious One

As rain pelted the foliage and a boom of thunder rang in the distance, I found myself alone and seemingly abandoned in that jungle. Nervously craning my neck back once more, I looked for *it*. That terrible hiss, accompanied by the image of two sharp, yet cold eyes that adorned the ashen scaly visage of the monster imprinted itself in my mind. My sensitive heart trembled at the thought of recalling its name. It came to me nonetheless – *Albertosaurus*.

Beginning to recall that scene of horror I had just fled from, I felt myself paralyzed by fear. I knew I had to stop thinking about it.

Don't get lost in your thoughts, or else...

The sound of wet leaves and branches being crunched underfoot nearby flung me back into the present moment. My eyes widened in terror as I realized that I was not alone anymore. Hopefully that *thing* wasn't my visitor, but my thoughts insisted otherwise. Suddenly, I felt the rush of adrenaline pulsing through my veins once again. As I desperately searched for whatever was making those noises, a rustling along the bright green line of foliage to my right caught my eye. Sizing up those plants, I figured that they would be large enough to hide the *Albertosaurus*. Or perhaps they were only hiding a peaceful herbivore, like the amiable *Plateosaurus* I saw earlier on the hike with my group?

Don't take a chance. You know what happened last time.

It only took me a split second after this thought to run as fast as my feet would allow. With my vision blurring from the combined effect of my movements and the raindrops piercing my eyes, I could only watch my steps in mere glimpses so that I wouldn't trip on the slippery rocks that lay scattered about the forest floor. This time, I hoped to find my way back to the trail I had abandoned in fright only some minutes before, so that from there I could follow the signs back to the entrance, and from there, demand the park staff help me leave this island. I didn't care if it was going to be a hassle to cancel the trip mid-stay, no matter what my parents would say or do otherwise to convince me out of this seemingly rash decision. *If* they were going to be upset at all, that is. Surely they would understand I didn't –

The sound of ferns behind me being smacked around at an increasing speed put a sudden halt to my excited train of thought. Seeing the narrow trail in front of me, I could only continue to exert my exhausted frame. The sounds behind me were getting louder.

In the corner of my eyes, I fortunately spotted a downed tree to my left, with a hollowed out center I could squirm my way into.

Cover!

I took the chance, and dove onto the ground. My knees echoed their pain throughout my body as I crawled into this grimy and damp makeshift shelter, but I kept going. It seemed as though the tyrannosaur wasn't close enough to see me make this maneuver, so inevitably when I heard it passing by, its footsteps gave me the impression that it was charging straight ahead. Lifting my head to watch it from a small hole in the log, I hoped to see the creature blindly plow through the foliage until it left my sight. However, I was stunned to see the *Albertosaurus* suddenly pause. As the animal stood some distance away, I studied its face. It had circular black pupils encased by vivid orange eyes, which were each adorned by an odd horn-like protrusion above the socket. As I saw it slightly turn its moist reptilian snout from side to side, nostrils flaring, the realization hit me. It wasn't giving up. It was *searching* for me.

I felt as if my heart dropped to the floor. My attempt at evading this fierce predator was now in a precarious balance. Mindful of my injuries, I knew that running away was not a viable option if it saw me.

And so, I paused too. But my pause was of another kind. Turning my face from the hole, I lifted my eyes, while simultaneously producing a gunmetal rosary from the pocket of my pants. With no other option, I began to silently pray the *Ave Maria*.

I sensed my anxieties begin to slip away, bit by bit, as I piously invoked the Blessed Mother to assist me. By the time I said, "...ora pro nobis peccatoribus..." I noticed that I wasn't tensing up anymore. In fact, I was even experiencing a kind of bliss, a bliss I had felt before, though in far different circumstances than this.

It was the bliss I felt in my mental prayer, or when I spent time in thanksgiving after receiving Holy Communion. It was the bliss not of this world.

As I said the words "*...nunc et in hora mortis nostrae*", I became more pensive. Perhaps this very hour was going to be the hour of my death. I reflected on my brief life up to this point. I remembered experiences of cruelty at the hands of others, particularly at school. I recalled the cruel girls who treated me as if I was an untouchable and the boys who picked on me for my alleged prudishness, and more importantly, how those of both sexes who mocked me for being a "loser" with "no friends". Such things hurt me deeply despite their untruthfulness. To possess God is to possess all good things, since He is Goodness itself. But what tugged at my soul the most was the thought that He is perfect Love; I could not live without my relationship with Christ. The loss of that really would make me a "loser". Though I was far from a saint, I knew many examples of how God had manifested His love to my soul. My

thoughts immediately jumped to my happiest memories, which all were connected to my chapel, my home away from home.

I had been witness to this love in the Holy Mass, mysterious as it was beautiful; the Latin language, far from being an unnecessary barrier to devotion, expressed perfectly through its immutable tongue the immortal glories of the King of Glory. I saw the love of God in the fellow young men I spoke to after Mass, in their kindness and their conversations. I saw it in the pious young women, veiled and modest in both appearance and demeanor. I saw it in the families, both parents and children, so abundantly full of life and laughter. I saw it in the priest, in his unassuming mannerisms, and heard it through his preaching in the pulpit and consoling words of guidance in the confessional. Though I hadn't had been there for that long, and was only beginning to form relationships with the priest and the parishioners, I knew that was the one place in this world where I felt like I really belonged. And even if the *Albertosaurus* were to take that community away from me, so what? Heaven would more than surpass anything I had experienced there.

Thinking on these things, I found it petty to hold anything against those who had hurt me back home. In the face of death, the world of high school cliques and infighting utterly lost their power. I was sure that if I really was to die here, all those who had spoken ill of me would feel guilty that the last words they spoke to a dead man were full of venom. I hoped they would know that I had forgiven them in this world.

"Forgive them Father, for they knew not what they did," I prayed.

Likewise, I forgave my parents and my brother for practically dragging me to this place. I hoped they wouldn't be hard on themselves for my death. This storm wasn't their fault, and it wasn't their fault that this carnivore had escaped. Perhaps they had already assumed me dead, considering that I had no means of contacting them or park security since the attack; I had accidentally dropped my phone within those first few moments of horror.

Those dreadful footsteps roused my attention again, along with the swaying of some bushes.

Is this it? I thought.

Breathing in, and speaking in a low tone, I thanked my Guardian Angel for these last moments and then I recited the Act of Contrition.

As I closed this prayer, I tuned out the ringing of the rain and listened more closely to what was happening outside this puny shelter. My eyes widened. There was an incredible absence of footsteps. It wasn't getting closer, at least it so it seemed. Turning my head, I looked out the hole once again.

No, he's not there. Better look somewhere else, I thought.

Cautiously, I looked out in the leftward direction of my crawlspace. Made visible by the little light that breached the jungle canopy, I saw the animal in the distance walking away, with its tail swaying from side to side as it did.

It was going away!

Rejoicing, I gave thanks to Jesus and Mary in that moment of pure victory.

When I saw it leave my sight, I left the safety of the log and cautiously made my way back on the trail, determined to follow it home.

Chapter II: On the Straight and Narrow

Under the shade of the path and despite the pangs of my wounds, I continued my journey through the storm. The sky above was slowly clearing, though the rain kept pouring down. My way forward was illuminated by sunlight which pierced through the branches of the jungle roof. As I noticed that the sun was a little past its height, it came to me that I had little sense of how much time I had lost, and now more importantly, how much time I had left. Though it would seem that it was now around two o'clock, this came as only a minor relief, as I still was unsure as to how long it would take me to get back to the park's main hub, Eden City. Evidently, I found the prospect of spending a night in this jungle quite horrific, given the storm, but also the threat of the *Albertosaurus*, which still lingered in my mind. And who was to say that was the only predator lurking in these woods? I didn't want to find out for certain, but I had no means to properly navigate the path. As it turned out, this part of the trail strangely lacked the aid of the signs I had been expecting. Moreover, my once colorful and charmingly illustrated map, given to me by my tour guide, was now marred by mud and tears here and there as a result of my fall during the initial *Albertosaurus* attack.

Looking ahead, I paused at the sight of a fork in the path. Now, my hopes of finding the way out were further dimmed. I figured that I'd have to chance it; there was no way of telling which path was the shortest or where else they could possibly lead, given the lack of any kind of sign. At wit's end, this thought came to me:

Pray to Saint Anthony. He will guide you.

Ah yes, why didn't I think of that before! Saint Anthony, after all, is the patron of lost items. I recalled hearing from my priest the story of how the saint had prayed and fasted for the safe return of a stolen book. I had also heard of other miracles which occurred during and after the life's journey of Padua's wonder-worker had come to an end. Surely his intercession would prove useful for a lost person?

Putting aside my troubled mind, I braved the muddy soil and knelt down. Remembering a verse from my favorite psalm, I prayed it:

Make the way known to me, wherein I should walk: for I have lifted up my soul to thee.

Finishing this, I asked St. Anthony to bring this intention before the Heavenly Father, that I, in some way, would be shown the safe path.

No sooner had I finished this prayer than I found myself forced from this position, startled by the rustling of ferns to my right. Thankfully, what emerged was a *Styracosaurus*, a herbivore.

Built similarly to a *Triceratops* but much smaller and possessing one central horn instead of three, I remembered (to my relief) that this was one of the animals which was *supposed* to appear on the trail. Taking in this wonder, I noted the light-blue hue of the creature's scaly hide, and the spikes protruding from the animal's skull crest. These spikes were of varying sizes, with the largest at the top of the crest, and the smallest near the neck. With such features, the ceratopsian appeared crowned, as it were, by this impressive line of defense. The animal took notice of me, having gazed back at me with its lizard-like eyes, and calmly proceeded to cross over to the fork's left path and went straight down that road.

Seeing this as a sign from the good saint, I thanked God and, while keeping a distance from the creature, kept up with its slow and steady pace on that path.

As I followed the *Styracosaurus*, I caught sight of some smaller dinosaurs among the brush, specifically a gathering of green-colored *Dryosaurus* to my right, who were hard to make out due to their camouflage. There were three, no – now four; the last one's head had just perked up to look at me. They weren't afraid of me; these two-footed herbivores, like the *Styracosaurus*, had been conditioned (according to my tour guide) to not fear contact with humans. I recalled that the young women who were in my tour group were especially desirous to see these animals because of how "cute" they looked. A small dose of anxiety sprung up in me after remembering that detail, considering that I had no idea if those girls had survived the attack or their current whereabouts. Accompanying it was a prickling thought which condemned me for "abandoning" them by running away from the *Albertosaurus*. Such a thought was absurd as it was scrupulous. How could I have fought against that monster? To try to search for them off the path wasn't a viable solution at all, given the size of this jungle. It would only make me lose my way again.

I realized that if I could get back to the park, I could contact security about the situation and they would locate the others. The sooner I did that, the sooner they could be found if they were lost out here. I could only hope that they, along with the other members of that group, would find the way I had.

Continuing this trek, the *Styracosaurus* proceeded down a slight hill, which opened up to a charming little clearing beside a cliff. Out of the cliffside a waterfall gushed out, which flowed down into a pond. Gathered around the water were several *Styracosaurus*, one of which turned towards the *Styracosaurus* in front of me and gave out a grunt. My *Styracosaurus* gave out a similar vocalization and left the path, rejoining its herd. The path snaked around the pond, but looking a little ahead, I saw that the path connected to a rest stop positioned right by the body of water. Though I knew there were several of these structures along the trail, I hardly expected to come across one of them given my disorientation. Relieved, I thought it

best to try to get into the inviting wooden house and dry off. Perhaps I could find a phone to contact the park officials and relate to them what had happened.

Walking closer, I could see through the windows that the building was presently unoccupied, which came as a disappointment. Putting my hand on the knob, I could tell that the door wasn't locked – I was able to get in, and wasted no time in doing so. Checking my surroundings, it had the usual amenities one would expect – a small dining area along with a kitchen and a refrigerator stocked with various food items, a set of bathrooms, some snack machines off to the side, a TV sporting the *Pansauria* logo. Displayed on the logo were two silhouetted heads – one of a *Brontosaurus* and another of a *Tyrannosaurus* – placed side by side, surrounded by leaves. This rest stop was quite a comfortable place.

Sensing the needs of my now cold and weary body, I sat down on a couch in front of the TV to rest for a little while. Noticing it wasn't on, I grabbed the remote and pressed the power button. The screen flickered on and displayed some kind of documentary about all the various dinosaurs in the park. Seeing a list of channels on a sheet of paper on the table right in front of me, I saw one channel associated with giving guests a live-streamed view of the main street of Eden City.

Eden City, I thought, pausing to reflect. *Now that's a name!*

Curiously, I punched in the number associated with the "Main Street" channel, in the slight prospect that I could spot my parents and brother in the crowd. Even in the likely event they were not there, the sight of the crowds would at least go a long way in confirming my guess that whatever had occurred out on the trail was an isolated tragedy, and that everything was more or less normal back –

I was struck at the sight of a solid black screen dominated by white text in the middle, which read:

ERROR: CONNECTION LOST

The line below it had a phone number to contact for tech support, but I had bigger problems on my mind than getting the TV to work right. A suspicion emerged in my mind that things were not as well as I had supposed, but sought to put this to rest by excusing the error as a mere technical issue. I considered flipping to one of the other live feed camera channels, like the one for the *Tyrannosaurus* exhibit to see if I'd experience the same error again, but in the end I decided against it. I didn't want to give into paranoia, and, after all, had a phone call to make.

Rising from the couch, I spotted a table with a landline phone and went over to it. Scanning the numbers listed on the laminated sheet right next to it, I found the one parallel to the words "PARK SECURITY", and dialed that number in, pressing the phone to my ear.

As I waited, I looked outside to that herd of Styracosaurs, and although they were similarly colored, I identified my herbivore friend among them. I thanked God and St. Anthony for this unexpected guide.

Chapter III: Hoping Against Hope

I put down the phone. It was the only logical thing to do, after about a minute of complete static. There was no kind of message from an uncanny robotic voice telling me to hold or anything like that—just static. This only further soured things. Now I had little clue of what to do, and my pressing fears that something had seriously gone wrong across the park were increasingly becoming harder to doubt. Trying to calm myself, I looked again to the table in front of the TV, which had a stack of illustrated magazines of the unique wildlife the park had to offer. Taking my place on the couch, I reached across and grabbed the top volume, which had a profile image of a rather stoic looking *Triceratops*. The pictured animal was a mottled orange in color, with verdant foliage in the background contrasting the herbivore's iconic face.

Holding the magazine to my face, I opened it, and while doing so, I also happened to catch a glimpse of the Styracosaur herd from the corner of my eye. It seemed absurd to stare at pictures of dinosaurs when I had some right in front of me, but this act really wasn't about *seeing* dinosaurs—it was about escape.

So I escaped into the pages of that volume, thumbing through picture by picture. The vivid pictures, with their calming portrayal of the lives of the park's dinosaurs, naturally made me remember some events from before the storm—memories of my family and I traveling through the main street of the park, which teemed with the activity of smiling tourists, families, young and old alike. Immediately I felt myself transported back into those moments, which I now found myself treasuring.

Eden City may not have been as grand in scale as New York, but with towering white skyscrapers and a variety of small shops and other buildings, it was well and truly a city in its own right. Though, there was something that set this city apart from all the others, aside from its proximity to dinosaurs of course. It was the world's first fully operational "green city". Trees and vines were planted on balcony levels of apartment buildings and were allowed to grow freely, giving off a surreal atmosphere. It was one of nature and modern civilization mixed together, a kind of tamed wilderness, but one that was entirely artificial. It puzzled me as to why anyone would want to live here, considering that doing so meant submitting oneself to a rigorous digital ID system as well as being constantly under surveillance—all, of course, to ensure "guest and resident safety". Though the city was built mostly for pedestrian tourists, there were some roads present. But within those boundaries, the only cars that were allowed were automated and run on electricity. The whole picture seemed uncanny to me.

But in spite of the uncanniness, glimmers of humanity managed to leak through this concrete jungle.

I remembered how, by the gift shop, I came upon a scene of a small boy playfully snatching a green T-Rex hat from his little sister's head. Then I witnessed the well-timed intervention of their weary father; this little sight was enough to warm my heart, which was then being torn apart by thoughts of cynicism on account of this vacation. Longingly, I tried replaying the memory of the time I saw my first dinosaur. Which was species was it? Then the scene came back to me. I pictured it once again, recalling the sight of an inviting warm-colored sign that read *Parasaur Pasture*, which beckoned my family and I to veer off Eden City's main street into a winding path, flanked by foliage, dense and tall.

At its end, the path opened to a wider area with a platform, made mostly of wood and flanked by sturdy metal fences. One could access the platform by an incline or stairs to get a proper view of the creatures in the exhibit, and so my family and I eagerly made our way to the balcony. My bad mood was starting to fade – it was hard to remain a grinch among all those entranced tourists. After all, I did *love* dinosaurs, ever since I was a little boy in fact. But what I didn't like was *this place*.

Aside from the sad reality that *Pansauria* used their live dinosaurs as unknowing propagandists for Darwinism, it both amazed and angered me that the corporation had the guts to admit that these animals were all imported from a "lost world" – several in fact – but constructed their little narrative in manner that completely skipped over the very reasonable point about how such places called into question the timeline proposed (or rather assumed) by modern scientists. Despite the inherent contradiction in affirming the existence of places where the supposedly ever present process of evolution "stood still" for an alleged 65 million years, an unimaginably gargantuan amount of time, what angered me the most was that people *still ate it up!* After these considerations came the commonly held concerns about the cosmopolitan theme park scene – soulless consumerism compounded with stories of the abuse of man and animal alike. I had heard all sorts of rumors, from tales about park employees complaining about being overworked and underpaid, to the "open secret" that carnivores were purposely underfed so that they would certainly put on a show for feeding time. There was even a story about a *Brontosaurus* in *Sauropod Safari* nearly crushing a tour jeepney to defend its startled young from the intrusion of a camera flash. But the one that had startled me the most was a vitriolic theory which claimed something sinister was behind the "delayed opening" of the *Herrerasaurus Heights* exhibit. The "unforeseen circumstances" mentioned by *Pansauria* in their monotone-sounding corporate press release about the subject were, in reality, a series of vicious attacks from its inhabitants on park staff, all covered up by out of court settlements and NDAs. Nonetheless, my parents and younger brother

complained of my complaints. According to them, my critiques were yet another indication that I was one who always found the worm in every apple. I begged to differ.

In those moments, my mood changed rather swiftly when I raised my eyes and thus escaped my thoughts; I found myself transfixed by the gaze of a *Parasaurolophus* some distance away inside the paddock, where there was a great clearing. The creature was close enough that I could make out the proverbial whites of its eyes, though these were gray, encasing black reptilian irises. Were it dusk, the dinosaur's arrangement of light and dark green stripes would have rendered it almost invisible among its surroundings. It stood elegantly, serving as a lookout for the other members of its herd, which were gathered around a small lake beside the dinosaur. Drinking at this lake were six other parasaur, and these were joined by several lanky *Struthiomimus*, whose patterning was a shade of dark brown with vertical golden stripes. As the lookout parasaur turned its face west towards the forest, it gave out an otherworldly yet soothing trumpet. To get my attention, my brother eagerly nudged me to look towards the treeline, where more members of the herd were emerging. Now I started to see this place in another light. Like my family and the other guests around me, I was entranced by this scene of natural bliss. Despite all of those things I was bitter about, in those moments I sensed a very real connection, not only with the dinosaurs, but also with creation itself, which modernity had robbed me of. Now I understood the paradoxical spell of *Pansauria*.

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I was shook from my daydreaming by the sounds of frantic knocking. The sounds of thunder and rain resumed; I was back in the present, and the "real world" was calling me.

As this new noise rang in my ears, I dropped the magazine and sprang from the couch, cautiously making my way to the door.

I must have locked the door from the inside, I realized.

There was a small window in the door that allowed me to see the unexpected guest, who turned out to be a young woman of my age, an attractive blonde with gray eyes and dressed in green. She was shivering. Was she more afraid of what was out there than struck by the coldness of the rain? I couldn't tell, but my heart sank for her. Not wanting to see her in this state, I swiftly opened the door and gestured for her to come inside. As she smiled in relief as she passed me by, I held myself back from blushing. Then, I closed the door behind her, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious while doing so.

After this was done, I turned around and asked the girl a question.

"Do you need me to get anything for you? There's probably some bandages around here, if you're hurt."

"I think I'm okay," the girl told me in a soft tone, yet I sensed anxiety in her voice.

I wanted to give her a chance to air things out. "Let me guess," I inquired, "You were chased by the *Albertosaurus* too? You know, the one that looks like a smaller T-Rex and is all black?"

"Yes," she responded.

"Then do you remember me? I can't tell if we met before, you know, what happened back there." I asked, lifting my hand at the last part of my sentence and pointing in the relative direction of where I had seen the predator.

After seeming to study my face a little, she said with a smile, "I remember you!" She paused, and then continued. "You were a part of our hiking group," and at these words, her face fell again, recalling the tragedy behind the "were" in her sentence.

"But I don't think we, like, talked. I remember seeing you."

"I see," I replied.

With an air of levity, I continued, "Well, we ought to get to know each other. What's your name?"

"Hope," said the girl. "And yours?"

"A lovely name," I responded. "Mine is John."

"Nice to meet you, John," Hope said to me.

She now leaned towards me for some kind of hug. When I meant that I wanted to get to know her, I didn't mean for it to be like this!

I awkwardly dodged her, pulling back and holding up my hands. I sensed my weakness in this moment. The poor girl was probably doing this in innocence, merely looking for comfort in the light of the chaos, but I recalled the saying about how the path to Hell is paved with good intentions. Knowing what I had to do, I made an excuse. For most of my life, I had made excuses against doing God's Will. Now I was going to make one in favor of doing it.

"I need to check something," I said, stammering a little while I found my words.

"You do?" Hope asked in a puzzled tone.

"Oh yes," I firmly stated. "There's something wrong with the phone and I lost mine, so we're cut off from the rest of the park."

I paused.

"That is, unless if you have yours."

Hope shook her head.

“We are in the same boat then, Hope. I’m going to find a vantage point to see if I can signal for help.”

It did not take me long after saying this for me to start searching around the room. Finding a spare orange-colored parka from a coat rack was simple enough, but I needed something beyond this to justify my trip. Taking a guess, I imagined what I was looking for would perhaps be located in one of those drawers underneath the TV set. Surely they had to have one of these lying around this visitor's center. And after some digging, I found it—a flare gun.

Seeing my determination, I noticed that Hope seemed to back down. It was as if she was about to tell me something, but reluctantly decided against doing so.

“Good luck, John,” she said with an air of optimism. I could still sense a bit of worry in her voice.

As I made my way out the door, I turned and thanked her. I left Hope with these words:

“I will not forget you, Hope. I will be back—I promise you.”

Chapter IV: An Upward Journey

After getting my feet back on the path, I made my way towards the cliff face that first greeted me when I had found the rest stop. Staring to my side, I noticed that the *Styracosaurus* herd was no longer present by the lake. So it seemed that I was alone once more, but I realized it only *seemed* that way. I felt a little less secure than I was before, but I kept up my confidence. As I studied the arrangement of the rock wall in front of me, I knew that there was simply no room for me to maneuver my way up.

Shame. I'll have to find another way, I thought.

The path stretched itself out before me, continuing in a single direction past the clearing and back again into the jungle. Timidly I breathed in, but I raised my heart and eyes to the heavens above, filled with ominously dark clouds. Finding strength once more, I walked as the rain continued to pour down.

After what felt like a few minutes, I found a part of the cliffside where the rocks were less jagged and where I could find space to ledge my feet. Wasting no time, I mounted the slippery ascent, and discounted the pain of the edgy stone surface as it pressed into my palms. Carefully I climbed, making sure to avoid getting tangled in the branches around me.

When my feet finally hit the grass of this new level, I saw another, much higher place which had been blocked from my sight below by the trees. A narrower cliff was before me, the summit of which rose above the trees. I knew this was the spot I was looking for. If I was going to fire this flare off, it was going to be there. There was a rim of trees which surrounded this dagger-shaped peak, and so I pressed forward towards the sky, and in no time I reached into the gap I had spotted earlier, and began the climb upwards.

I was only a few feet up when I heard a pattering of steps from below me—my eyes widened when I felt an inhuman tug on my right foot, which had been caught dangling in the air. Looking over my shoulder as I felt teeth puncture my shoe, I stared into the face of a *Dilophosaurus*, whose dark eyes glared back at me behind an intimidating crimson head crest. The mixture of dark brown stripes with an otherwise tan body made the size of the animal hard to figure out, but it was certainly larger than me. As I frantically tried to push myself up the precipice, the predator defiantly kept its grip on my shoe, like a dog playing tug-of-war with its owner. I could not only sense, but also see that it didn't have the entirety of my foot in its mouth, only the lower part.

I managed to think clearly amid the battle; I would have to position my right foot in such a way to line up for the left to kick the carnivore. This would hopefully make the dinosaur withdraw. With my heart racing, I rose a little up the slippery incline and tried harder than before to *pull* my shoe out, but the *Dilophosaurus's* teeth acted like nails, forcing it in place. Stretched out and weary, I held on to a crack in the rock wall, and swung my free foot into the creature's face. As I sensed myself free of the dinosaur's jaws, I felt relieved – but only for a second. The carnivore's momentum was now dragging me down with it! In my weakness, I lost my grip and slid, but soon regained it on a lower part of the wall. With haste I ascended back up to where I had been, but in so doing noticed that my troubled foot felt lighter than before. Looking down, I realized why. The *Dilophosaurus* had snatched my shoe!

I could see the theropod down there, incontinent with its peculiar prize. Looking up, it gave out a nasty hiss. In desperation, it leaped up with claws outstretched to catch me – but it barely missed.

Though I could feel a limp in my right foot, I continued upwards amid the pain.

"*Jesus, Mary, Joseph,*" I softly repeated, taking comfort in those holy names.

When my hands found the ledge I anticipated reaching, I pulled myself over the wall, and laid on the flat stony surface in front of me. A pang of anger struck me when I saw that my limping foot, covered only by a sock, was now colored in splotches of red. I felt the cool sensation of the rainwater relieving my poor foot, while it seemed to sting my flesh through the sock at the same time. Lifting myself upwards, I reached down to my other foot and untied the shoe, preparing to throw it at the *Dilophosaurus*. I knew I'd probably miss, especially given the height, but I wasn't thinking rationally. I wanted *revenge*.

As soon as I peered over the edge, that flair of emotion passed from me as if it was a vapor, and I regained my cool. Closing my eyes, I breathed in and repeated again:

"*Jesus, Mary, Joseph.*"

Opening them again, to my surprise, the carnivore had fled. I could see more clearly now, though there were no trees here to shield me from the assault of the rain. As I arose, I put the shoe down beside me.

Another dinosaur that shouldn't be here, I thought.

Sensing discomfort, I took off the stained sock, and took off the other. The puncture wounds weren't terrible. In fact, I seemed (thankfully) to have gone through the worst of it, as my shoe must have absorbed most of the creature's bite force. I stood up and left these behind, with my bare feet now touching the smooth wet rock.

Leaning forward to hold my balance, I paced ahead so that I could finally get my visual. A thought came to me – my flare gun. Rubbing my eyes and squinting, I saw a valley stretch out before me, containing most of what I recognized as *Pansauria*. The dazzling metropolis of Eden City, which lay in the middle of the valley impressively sectioned in a radial design, had gone through a striking transformation. I could see that now there was a fire in that place – in fact, multiple fires and, with them, a haze which hovered around the towering buildings. Even from this distance – to my upmost horror – I could hear the harrowing screams of people, screams like I'd never heard before, which sounded like they came from the damned rather than the living. Alongside those horrible sounds I also heard the harrowing sounds of gunfire and blaring sirens. As a flash of lighting raced across the sky, further illuminating that scene of horror, I realized that the worst *really had* come to pass here.

As I felt myself go into shock, I invoked again those holy names, "*Jesus, Mary, Joseph*".

After this, I fainted, falling down on the rock floor as thunder boomed once more.

Chapter V: A New Path

I rose up in haste, seemingly awake, but my surroundings had changed. While I felt the damp rock surface beneath me, I could hardly see more than a few feet ahead. I perceived that I was encased by a strange mist, and that the storm had seemingly ended. Timidly, I watched as two figures emerged from the fog. Both of them were men; I could tell by their shape as they moved from the cloud and towards me. These figures, one a middle aged man with a great beard and the other a young man around my age, were surrounded by a mesmerizing radiance. Their appearance, combined with their affection I read in their expressions and white garments, filled me with awe rather than fear.

Before I could say anything, the bearded man began to speak, and looking upon me with fatherly eyes said, "Son, be not afraid. You have seen the horrors which lie ahead – but let this not move you to despair. God is with you, and the Mother of Mercy has not forgotten your cause."

As if lit up by a flame, my hope was rekindled; my heart was touched.

"These are wise words. Good soul, may I know your name?" I responded.

The man answered, smiling, "I am Godfrey of Bouillon." As if reading my mind, he continued, "The man to my right was my august successor in life, called Baldwin the Fourth."

Looking at Baldwin, I found myself struck once again. No longer did leprosy torment the young king, neither blindness of eyes nor lameness of leg – he suffered a little while in this valley of tears, and now enjoyed eternal bliss.

"See good friend," said the soul I now beheld, "how the Lord makes all things new!"

Tears welled in my eyes, then they widened in happy surprise: "Blessed heroes!" I said, and bowing in reverence, added, "I am truly unworthy to be in your presence."

Speaking again, Godfrey said, "Consider then, faithful son, how much less worthy you are to kneel before the Host than us."

Sensing as many arrows as words flew from that venerable knight's lips, I felt my pride shrivel.

Then as a son to father, I inquired, "What shall you have me do?"

"You shall leave this place," Godfrey replied, "and head into that land down below, wherein the worldly now suffer for their excess. Bring Hope with you, but remember that without Faith she shall be your ruin. As we did, you shall face many foes – but the strength shall be

given to you to overcome them, as it was given to us. Remember that all your trials have been permitted by God for your sanctification, and recall that it is he who perseveres to the end who shall be saved.”

No sooner did the great knight finish these words than I found myself asleep once again.

In a stupor, I sensed something small on top of me, and a tiny thing on my face. Slowly, I opened my tired eyes – and found myself face to face with a *Sinosauropteryx*, as the small dinosaur lunged forward and jarringly grabbed a spider from my face and ate it.

Impressively, the creature narrowly avoided biting me. My instinct to fear the creature was subdued on the realization that the lemur-sized animal was no real threat to myself; in fact, it had certainly done me a great favor by getting rid of that spider. The creature had a racoon-like face pattern, colored in orange which contrasted the white which made up most of the face and the entirety of the dinosaur’s underside. Likewise, the animal’s back was orange, which, following the course of its diminutive body, terminated in a ringed lemur-like tail. Notably, the creature was covered entirely in feathers, which resembled fur. They were noticeably different from the feathers of any bird I’d seen, but that did not make them “simple”, as the park’s brochure had stated.

The *Sinosauropteryx* craned its head sideways, staring at me (as it were) with an air of curiosity with its big bird-like eyes. Suddenly, it then skipped away to its next destination.

I smiled. I then remembered that at least this one was *supposed* to be in this part of the park.

Arising, I noticed that the storm had truly cleared, and that the sounds of the chaos in the park had subsided. The flames, however, were still burning and smoke still clouded the area. Among the horizon, I spotted the shades of escaped pterosaurs flying overhead of the ruin, like vultures hovering over a dying animal. Taking this into account alongside my strange yet consoling vision, I refused to wait any longer. I moved so quick that I practically leapt off the rock floor. Finding my flare gun beside me, I took it back into my hands and pondered my next move. If I fired this thing off, *perhaps* it would attract undesirable attention. Perhaps. But, this was my stated reason for making this journey, and I did not want to make myself a liar. After all, surely there was somebody *out there* who would see it. Without any delay, I loaded a flare that I had stored in the pocket of my parka, and fired it off, mystified by the trail of fog as it flew into the sky.

Now I could leave this place.

Before I ventured down to where I had come, I found my socks and one of my shoes, and carried these until I retraced my steps down the cliff. Thankfully, I found my other shoe still lying there on the ground. It had a few holes, but was still wearable. This would grant that

bitten foot some well-needed protection from the elements. And so, I put on my socks and tied my shoes, and then went back into the jungle.

I trekked through the forest path, keeping my guard up yet making sure not to panic, for I knew that if indulged in fear that I would surely lose my way as I had before. As I started to hear some growling noises in the distance I slowed my pace in caution. Chills ran down my spine. Whatever it was, it sounded like it was an alligator, but amplified – it had to be from something larger. My heart started pounding in fear, as I realized these noises had to be coming from some kind of carnivorous dinosaur.

A thought came to me: *Be strong and give yourself to God! A man's present dangers should never cloud his judgment.*

Reminded of the encouraging words spoken to me by those valiant Defenders of the Holy Land, I pressed on, brandishing my rosary once again.

Not everything is out to get you, I thought, being reminded of the *Sinosauropteryx*, and even the *Styracosaurus* from earlier.

Having surrendered my fears to God, I sensed the ill feelings fly from me as I walked onward. Soon, I reached the doorstep of the rest stop, waiting for Hope to greet me. She met me there with a relieved expression on her face, and invited me back inside.

“Thankfully I made it back in one piece,” I remarked as I walked inside.

She looked at me with a smile.

Then curiously she asked, “What’s that in your hand?”

“This?” I responded, boldly holding up my rosary. “It’s my rosary. The Virgin Mary has saved me many times through this.”

I found it somewhat difficult to read her expression, but she seemed to both surprised and impressed by this answer.

Then, changing the subject, she asked, “What did you see?”

“I saw –” I paused. I knew I had to tell her the truth, as scary as it was.

Continuing, I said, “I climbed up a cliff high enough to see the park, and I saw that it was in chaos. There were fires, screaming, and even gunshots here and there. Though it subsided around the time I left, it seems that the worst has come to pass down there. Pteranodons also have gotten out – I saw a lot of them flying over Eden City”

“That’s horrible,” she answered nervously, understandably quite distressed by what she had just heard.

I noticed her expression changed, as she lit up a little. Gathering herself, she said, “Well, I found a really helpful map while you were gone. Let’s look at it together! I even made us some food from the refrigerator, so we can sit down and talk while we plan things out.”

“Awesome! Thank you so much.” I responded.

We sat down at the kitchen table, each of us picking a chair from the direct opposite side from the other. The map was laid out on the center of the table, and took up most of it, as it was more the size of a poster than a map. As Hope grabbed the sandwiches she prepared and placed them on the table alongside two bottles of water she’d found, I asked in an amused tone, “Where did you find this map? I’m surprised I didn’t manage to find it before you – I mean, look at the size of it!”

“Oh,” she responded nonchalantly, pointing to the drawer beneath the TV, “it was rolled up in one of those drawers for some reason. Strange right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Real strange.” I tried to hide my embarrassment, as I recalled that if only I had searched that last drawer when looking for the flare, I would have found the map then and there. So close I was, yet so far!

Before eating, I crossed myself.

Hope craned her neck a little at this; evidently she had the misfortune of being deprived of seeing even this practice.

“Oh, I’m just making the Sign of the Cross,” I explained. “It’s what us Catholics do before we eat. Through it, we ask God to bless our food.”

She, satisfied with this reply, nodded and began to eat and drink. I did the same, but then paused between one of my bites and asked, “I assume you’re not a Catholic. If you don’t mind me asking, what do you believe in? I’m just curious.”

Oh, yes – I had committed a grave sin against indifferentism! *How dare I bring up religion to a stranger!* I thought ironically. I did not need to hide my faith, or rather the Faith, to anyone. The world, with all of its cowardly formalities, disgusted me before I’d even set foot on this island. Now, after almost having died here on two separate occasions, I cared even less about that terrible thing called “human respect”.

“Um, I–” the girl said, stammering at the rather direct nature of the question, “I’m not really sure what I believe. I don’t believe in any kind of God – not to offend you or anything, but I just don’t know for sure.”

“Okay,” I responded. After getting a little pensive, I continued, “I wasn’t always a believer, so I suppose I know where you’re coming from.”

"You do?" she asked in surprise.

"Oh yes," I affirmed.

Then, I smiled and quipped, "Well, I suppose you can be my doubting Thomas, for now at least."

In response, Hope seemed to grasp the meaning of my statement, as she smiled in amusement.

...

When we finished our meal, we started to pour over the map.

"We are here," Hope said, carefully highlighting our rest stop on the map with her finger. "So," she continued, tracing her finger down the image of the path, "if we follow the trail back from where we started, we'll end up in Eden City."

"Maybe it's not the best idea," she added. "But John, considering that park security will be more likely to find us there than here, I think it's worth it."

Thoughtful and composed, I said, "I see your point, Hope. But I don't think it's a good idea. What if the *Albertosaurus* is still lingering somewhere along that way? Sure, maybe he's moved around, maybe he hasn't. But that doesn't exclude the possibility of other predators. I think there's a quicker way we can take."

"Really?" she asked.

"See here," I replied, as I used my finger to draw a path from the stop and to a nearby river I saw on the map.

The river in question was actually a part of another attraction, a boat tour entitled *Baryonyx Bayou*. Reading from the map, I could tell that a fence separated that part of the trail from this other area. Despite this, the trail still came close enough where hikers could see into it, and where they in turn could be seen by who or whatever was on the other side.

"I've already been through some of this area," I continued, pointing out some of the path leading up to the river. It's *mostly safe*—"

"*Mostly safe?*" she interjected.

Shrugging, I explained, "I did encounter a *Dilophosaurus* on the way up that cliff I told you about. Thanks be to God I fought him off, but that was the only carnivore I encountered there."

This dose of clarity seemed to calm Hope down, but only by a little bit.

"That reminds me," I added. "I got bitten by that dinosaur while I was up there. It wasn't anything major, but —"

Her expression immediately shifted to one of great concern. "John, I can get something to put some pressure on it. Hopefully that thing isn't poisonous..."

"Thanks," I said gratefully. But the possibility of what she said still scared me.

I don't remember anyone saying anything about them being poisonous, I thought.

As I saw her walk away to grab a First Aid kit, I quickly remarked, "Don't worry about that right now. The pain isn't too bad, we'll bandage it up before we leave, okay?"

She paused in her tracks. "Okay," she said, seeming to dismiss her worry.

"Look," I said, drawing her attention back to the map as she returned to the table. "The river goes down into a swamp, and then flows downstream into another river, which brings us back to the park's center."

"Also, considering that we are talking about a river, it's easier for park security to go through this area and search for people than ours," I added.

"Well, rivers do have a way of attracting animals, as well as people," she quipped.

"Then that's a risk we must take," I stoically remarked.

"Also," she intoned quizzically, tapping the name *Baryonyx*, "aren't those carnivores?"

"No," I responded. "They're fish eaters. Besides, if the park had no issues with putting a boat tour through their territory, I suppose they won't mind us."

She nodded in agreement.

"If we take the path you suggested," I explained, "we might have a lesser risk but we'll be more worn out by the time anyone finds us, that is if we happen to make it to our destination in one piece. But if we take mine, it's a greater risk, sure, but it's less exhausting and we have a much better chance of being found. If we go there and something bad happens, we have a much better chance of quickly making it back here. Even if —"

"Fine, I guess you're right," Hope remarked, rolling her eyes.

At least she's willing to listen, I thought.

"Alright then, let's get on the move," I said, exuding confidence. "And don't forget the map."

"Sure," Hope answered. "I managed to find a backpack around here," and gesturing to her find that she had placed on the couch, added, "I don't think we'll fit the whole thing in there, but it will make it easier for us to bring the map. We can also place our waters in it too."

“Great!” I responded. “I know it’s not much, but I’ll carry the bag.”

“If you say so,” Hope calmly said.

We then prepared the backpack, and Hope tossed out the stained sock and bandaged my wound. Afterwards, we headed out on the trail side by side, keeping quiet so as not to attract any unwanted attention.

Chapter VI: Into the Breach

When we had arrived near the bank of the river, we saw a fence which stretched in both directions, as expected. The drab structures towered over us; two rows of round metal bars encased a wall of chainlink that would make reaching the other side impossible. To even get that high would be difficult, as the bottom of the fence was a six-foot high concrete wall.

Hope turned to me for support, while I pondered our next move. The impassibility of the fences practically made them like the walls of a fortress, thus ruining our chance of an easy rescue by boat. Of course, if our rescuers *just so happened* to have a few explosives on them, they could blow a hole for us to escape. But that would be leaving too much to chance.

Worry was building up once more in my heart; but after a brief reflection, a thought came to mind. It was something my Nonna had always reminded me when I'd panic over losing something as a little boy – never panic, because when you panic, you lose sight of the reality that very often what you're looking for is closer than you think. This gave me pause; I breathed and swerved my head to the right, staring down the line of trees. Something caught my eye, and squinting, I saw it a little better. A little distant from where Hope and I stood, I could now make out that one of those fences was broken. It wasn't a minuscule hole, no – it was gaping wide, so much so that I could clearly make out the jungle on the other side.

After nudging her, Hope turned in my direction and saw what I had seen. Our eyes met once again; she nodded, confirming my discovery. And so, we ventured off the path. We kept close to the line of fences, and watched our flank for a potential attacker. I led the way by maintaining a steady pace. Although I didn't want to encourage Hope to go slowly, I didn't want Hope and I to run there either. Getting out of here was going to be a marathon, not a race.

No point in making ourselves more exhausted than we need to be, I thought.

When we had arrived at the fence, the scene stopped both of us in our tracks. The once sturdy chainlink material was torn down the middle, and the bars lay strewn in parts on the ground. We even spotted the presence of ominously large three digit footprints that led into our side of the jungle.

Hope looked to me. She didn't even need to ask; I knew what she meant by her cautious face, lit up by visible fear.

"I don't know what did this," I whispered, trying to comfort her, "but I think you'll agree with me that it's better that we don't stick around to find out."

She nodded in agreement.

Gesturing to her to go first, I took off the backpack and knelt down, holding out my hands so that she could boost herself upwards. She followed suit, using the added height to grab onto the top of the wall and pull herself over the ledge. Raising the bag towards her, she stretched out and received it from me, placing it beside her.

Suddenly, there was a series of sounds emanating from some fern bushes only a few feet away from us.

My heart dropped. We had to work *fast!*

Hope then quickly turned and grabbed my outreached hand. I could tell by her exasperated expression that she was struggling to raise me up.

Swerving my head back, I could see the bushes were being smacked from side to side; whatever was coming was getting closer.

Just then, I saw a scarlet crest emerging from one of the bushes. It was like a kind of spearhead attached to a tan serpentine shape sprinting in our direction, tail flailing about as it ran.

My other hand grasped the surface of the wall as I heard Hope scream in horror. She must have seen the creature too! Her attention was immediately pulled back to me after she heard me wheeze; she worked hastily to pull me up. In only a few moments, I felt my whole body go over the wall. I had rejoined Hope. The footsteps, now below me, completely stopped. Turning over, my hands shaking, I peeked over the crevice. My eyes met the cold reptilian eyes of the creature, with its gaze seeming to hold me in contempt as its head hung there, only a little below the wall.

As I lifted my head and looked at Hope, my attention was again drawn downwards, as I could hear the sounds of the dinosaur's feet on the dirt as it ran. Hope and I watched in amazement as it retreated swiftly back into the jungle, as if in defeat.

"*Dilophosaurus,*" I said to her in a fascinated whisper.

"The one you saw from earlier?" Hope asked me under a hushed tone.

"Might be," I replied softly.

Seeing that we were no longer in immediate danger, I decided to quench my thirst, grabbing my bottle of water from the backpack. As I drank, I noticed that Hope looked into the distance, and got visibly excited.

She then turned to me, whispering, "Don't you hear it?"

After gulping down a mouthful of water, I responded in a hushed tone, "Hear what?"

"The river!" she said, and then pointed in the vicinity of our destination. I saw it, and rejoiced.

Though we both knew that it was going to be here, it was another thing to see it in person. Seeing that river filled us with thoughts of escape from this terrible place and of returning home.

These pleasant thoughts were immediately interrupted by a new series of sounds from those bushes. I turned back towards them, and saw the shape of *Dilophosaurus* charging right at us.

"He's coming back!" I yelled in distress, as I tossed the backpack on the other side.

As the vile predator closed in on us, I saw it raise its claws in the air.

It was going to jump!, I thought.

"Go!" I hurriedly told Hope. Without a thought, I shoved her over the river side of the fence before she even had a chance to react.

I jumped down right afterwards. Thankfully Hope had braced for the impact and remained unharmed...

For now....

I heard the *Dilophosaurus* hiss angrily behind us.

As I grabbed the bag and ran with Hope, I looked back at it only for a second, but even in this I could see that the creature had successfully landed on the top of fence wall. Pushing its muscular forearms forward, it used its scaly digits to grasp both sides of the now-torn chainlink fence to push itself forward and leapt.

Turning my head, I could hear a *thud* hit the ground close to us.

We pushed ourselves as fast as we could, but I sensed that the fierce dinosaur was gaining on us.

Everything seemed like a whirlwind of green and brown to me as I ran through the dense jungle, having to swiftly dodge a stone here and jump over a rotting log there; it was not much different for Hope, as she ran by my side.

We then hit the much-awaited riverbank, and stopped in our tracks in horror.

I swerved around to face the creature, putting myself between Hope and it.

If this was going to be it, I thought, I'm not going down like a coward.

Raising my voice and my eyes, I prayed, "Lord, Into thy hands I commend my spirit."

Unexpectedly, the *Dilophosaurus* slowed down its pace and stopped in its tracks. It gazed, not at me or at Hope, but at something else. Simultaneously we heard the sound of water dripping behind us. Dripping from some kind of body, a large body...

I turned around slowly and saw the culprit. Covered in mossy green scales, mixed with some speckles of black, was the foreboding sight of a *Baryonyx*. Yellow eyes stared down from the dinosaur's crocodilian snout, and the creature bore its menacing teeth, letting out a deep hiss.

The *Dilophosaurus* proceeded to shrink back from its position, and scurried back into the forest.

Hope must have watched this ordeal too, as her scream of terror at the new creature rang in my ears. I acted swiftly, yanking her hand and pulling her behind me again, with our backs now facing the jungle instead of the river.

But the *Baryonyx* only looked at us for a little more, and as if it heard something we couldn't, quickly re-immersed itself into the murky water. Fear quickly gave way to admiration as I watched it swim away. The creature moved like an alligator, in that only part of the snout and tail were visible above the surface of the water.

Then after what seemed like an hour, but in reality was only around a minute, we heard the sound of a boat coming in our direction.

They had seen our flare!

We waited with joyful expectation as it approached, and as it came closer, both of us called out to it.

The boat lurched forward; it was one of the tour boats for this attraction which was commandeered by some park security armed with rifles. It was large, and instead of a canopy there was a gray metal cage, shaped like a dome, which hung over it for defense. The cockpit was constructed in a minimalist design, as the cage served the purpose that walls and a roof would on a standard boat of this size. The rest of the vehicle was painted in a brown-green camouflage pattern, and inscribed in red lettering on the sides were the words "BARYONYX BAYOU TOURS".

As the boat slowed down, both of us noticed that compared to the large array of seats, there were only a few other park guests were gathered inside. The other guests looked to be no younger than thirty. A door made out of the same material as the cage opened, and a middle-aged man in gray and black fatigues ushered us inside. Grabbing the backpack, I motioned for Hope to go in first. Then I followed, passing the captain as I went.

It didn't take long for the boat to start up after we had taken our seats in one of the middle rows. A strange silence permeated the air as the boat chugged its way through the swamp. People looked at us, and we looked at the others, but no one said a word. Everyone had their story – their expressions gave away that much.

After what seemed like half an hour, the boat stopped.

Did the engine die? Did we hit something? I thought nervously.

Like the others, I lurched forward, trying to see what was the cause. Looking past the approaching guard, who cautiously motioned for the guests to remain calm, I could now see *it* was only about fifty or so feet away.

This time, quite fortunately, *it* happened to be a swimming *Triceratops*. The river was deep enough even at this point that only half the creature's body rose above the water as it paddled forward. It was colored in a mottled tangerine pattern similar to the one I had seen on the magazine, and bore an infant of its kin on its back.

I pointed out this sight to Hope, who after recognizing the sight, smiled. I shared her enjoyment of something so simple in the aftermath of chaos. In fact, if I still had my phone, I would have taken a picture to preserve the moment.

Other people in the boat started noticing, but were ordered to keep their commotion down to a minimum by the guard. Under a hushed tone, he walked down the row and explained that the boat had been stopped in order to prevent startling the whole herd of *Triceratops*.

"A herd?" a man behind us asked.

The guard stopped where he was, and turned his head to face the man.

"Look to your right, you'll see more coming out of the jungle" he stated plainly. "They always travel in groups of about five to six adults."

Surely enough, after craning my neck a little, I could see more *Triceratops* emerging, and joining their companion in crossing the river.

However, I picked up on a little detail that had gone unnoticed; a *Baryonyx* was right there by the shore of the river only a few feet from the herd, contently dipping its snout inside the water to catch prey. That was until the final *Triceratops* to cross the river suddenly slipped on some mud and bumped into the piscivore.

Having been knocked back, *Baryonyx* raised its head from the ground and hissed at the offender.

The Triceratops returned by lunging a little forward with its scimitar-like horns, as if to bait the other into a fight. The other members of its herd, now on the other side of the shore, turned towards their companion's foe and grunted.

The guards, four in total, raised their rifles and took aim, while all the rest, including Hope and myself, anxiously watched.

Chapter VII: Upon the Rivers of Babylon

Time seemed to stand still, that was until a new bipedal shape charged out of the forest, something large, scaly, and green with black splotches. The distracted *Triceratops* didn't stand a chance, as it only took a moment for this new terror to lunge and clamp down on the neck of its prey.

I truly witnessed the impossible, though it merely seemed that way. I could hardly think, let alone react, in the time that this giant attacked!

The predator raised its immense reptilian head, jaws oozing blood. Its face, marked by an authoritative brow, was unmistakable – it was a *Tyrannosaurus Rex*!

A pair of crimson eyes flickered and then turned, glancing at the others and myself in the process. As I heard hurried sounds of foliage being moved around by large bodies to my left, I intuitively realized those were the sounds of the other *Triceratops* fleeing. The Rex seemed to carry, as it were, a breeze of palpable unease, which had now wafted its way towards us; some were still, and those who weren't were quaking in fear and screaming. I tensed up as I momentarily looked into those cold pupils, so alien yet so strangely familiar. Having shifted its head to the *Baryonyx*, the predator stared at this dinosaur and, baring its hand-sized teeth, let out a guttural growl. Immediately in response, the *Baryonyx* backed away and retreated into the river, hurrying as it swam away.

"Get us out of here!" a guard shouted to the captain. Only a few seconds later, the vessel's engine roared to life, and the Tyrannosaurus watched us in curiosity as we sped away from the grisly scene in what must have been under a minute. As a trail of foam was left behind on the swamp waters, we were jostled around; our seat belts were not tight enough, and so the passengers found something to cling to so that they would stay in place. Most, like myself, held onto the seat in front of them. Others, who sat close enough to the metal cage grabbed the bars for their support. Two of the guards managed to hold on to the cage; another fell on the floor and grabbed on the leg of one of the seats, while the one closest to me held onto an armrest. Everything seemed to go by in a blur of white and varying shades of green as we sped off. Sensing pressure on my shoulder, I turned immediately to my right, and was surprised to see Hope holding on to me.

After a few minutes passed, the boat slowed down but kept moving; we must have escaped the sight of the Rex by now. Again I looked around, to find everyone disheveled yet relieved from our close call. Hope parted my side, and took her place next to me once again. I felt strange about her getting close to me like that. Therefore I decided to offer my trouble up to

God and fixed my mind on other matters, moving my eyes to what lay outside of the cage's barrier. One sight on the river bank, sure enough, caught my attention immediately. Four *Plateosaurus* were gathered there, evidently some kind of family group; three drank from the river while one stared in our direction. They were small, at least as sauropods go, standing on four feet with a slender tail and neck and an oval-shaped head. As my gaze scanned the white stripes that contrasted the dark brown scales of the graceful herbivores, I found myself vividly recalling the first time I had seen one of these creatures.

The *Plateosaurus* only stood about eight feet away from us travelers, which numbered around ten people. The tour guide, who had quietly led us up this way, was a bearded man in his thirties. As it happened, the rest were all around my age, though that did not incline me to fraternize with them. There were six young women and four young men, including the tour guide, myself, and Hope. It was a very placid animal, and seemed to invite us into its realm as it got up on its hind legs and ate fruit from a tree, one of many in the vast jungle that encased us. No one spoke, as we were told to keep quiet by the guide, who had spotted the dinosaur before any of us, so that we would not scare it away by our voices. However, the smiles that gleamed from our faces communicated all that would have been said, though some were so dense that they did not take even this obvious hint from Nature to put aside the barrier of their phone screens. Their behavior puzzled me. Sure, I took a picture like them; but I stopped after this, and enjoyed the moment. Those poor souls, on the other hand, seemed obsessed with recording these moments rather than living in them!

After looking into the emerald eyes of the friendly dinosaur, I happened to meet the hazel eyes, downcast – in the direction of her phone – of an Italian girl with jet black hair and skin as pale as the luminous moon, though evidently (and unfortunately) Americanized; I could tell by her dress and by the way she spoke mere minutes beforehand. From overhearing a conversation she had with Hope and the other girls, I knew her name was Maria. That increased my soft spot for her, as I recognized that name as being a rendition of the name Mary, the name of the Blessed Virgin. By her appearance and mannerisms, she seemed to be one of my family members. In a way, it was uncanny; and in that uncanny valley laid a seeming world between the two of us. This was to such a point that her face reminded me of the youthful glow which once belonged to my gentle Nonna, recorded in a photograph I'd seen back home. How it troubled me to see that sad trait of worldliness which emanated through her charming accent and chained her to the screen, especially in a girl as beautiful as she was. How strange, to feel so separated from someone so oddly familiar! But what great beauty to recognize that she was surely one of my own people, by blood – but how this made me wish all the more that she could be one of my own people by faith.

With my thoughts now shifting, I recalled the storm and that frightful moment of attack; where had Maria been?

I felt something grab my shoulder, and was immediately thrust out of my zone to find Hope the culprit of this disturbance. She had a concerned look on her face.

"Are you alright?" she asked me.

Trying to hide my discomfort, I replied, "Don't worry. Sometimes I just zone out."

It was no lie, but rather a misdirection. Besides, I did not want her to share in remembering what I had remembered. Hopefully Maria was still alive out there, somewhere. As I looked around me, I noticed that the boat was now veering off from the bayou into a river fork, flanked on the right-hand side by a row of fences. In a mere minute we left the warmth of the sun and returned once more into the darkness of the jungle. Peering over Hope's shoulder, I saw the outline of a small gray structure about five hundred feet away, on the opposite side of the river. It was evidently some kind of bunker. I tapped her shoulder and pointed out the curious sight. Before I could say anything to her, the boat had moved close to this side of the bank and after slowing down, stopped entirely. As if on cue, one of the guards went to the center of the boat and addressed us all in an imperative tone.

"Listen up!" he exclaimed. Pointing towards the gray structure, he continued, "That over there is a bunker. We're going to escort you all there for the time being, so please, line up in an orderly manner and no one will get hurt."

There was a little commotion, but nothing went beyond a vague whisper as far I could tell. After seeing what we had seen, people were desperate and were willing to take any way out. It would only be a brief hike to safety, and there was no telling what dangers would lay in store if the boat had kept its course towards Eden City.

While standing in line, I counted about sixteen people on board the ship, myself and Hope included. It didn't take long for us to disembark the boat and, in a few footsteps, to wade through the shallow rivers to reach dry land. In the distance, I could hear the calls of some sauropods, whale-like and trumpeting. It gave me goosebumps; I clutched the shoulder straps of the backpack a little tightly and pressed on. There were several survivors ahead of us and a few in back, while the guard who'd just spoken to us led the group. Meanwhile, his three companions took up our flanks and rear.

About a hundred feet away from the bunker, I got spooked. There was a rustling, not in the bushes, no. It was coming from *above*.

Craning my head upwards, my eyes widened in horror as they met the cold blue eyes of another dinosaur, a man-sized theropod. It had nestled itself between a branch of a tree about ten or so feet above where I stood. In the darkness, I could discern that this animal was a ghostly pale, with turquoise stripes patterned like those of a tiger. Even for a living dinosaur

this one looked...off. With its rectangular head, forked tongue and scaly hide, it almost looked like a komodo dragon that managed to grow legs and forearms.

I wasn't the only one to see this new dinosaur; one of the guards had picked up on my distress, and after shoving me to the side, raised his rifle and yelled out:

"We've been ambushed! Get them to the bunker, Private!"

No sooner did he say this than he was struck down by the ferocious carnivore, much to the horror of myself and the others. First there were screams from the poor guard who had saved my life, but then these were followed by the screams of the creature and the roars of gunfire.

Hope and I ran for the door, along with the others. The guards had taken our rear, except for one. Swiftly, he led us to the door, frantically found the keyboard console and punched in a code. By the time that the passage opened and we had gotten through, I turned to see a swarm of these creatures attacking the remaining guards, who were quickly overwhelmed and slaughtered. Hope began to scream, and her screams blared in my ear and drowned out all other noise. Unlike most of their pack, some of these animals were uninterested in ripping apart the corpses of the fallen guards, and these eyed us curiously in response. Now inside the building, the last guard continued to sweat quite visibly as he punched in the code once again in another console. The creatures appeared to communicate with one another, as if planning our downfall, but to our great relief, the doors slammed shut before they could strike.

Chapter VIII: The Descent

It had been about half an hour since we first took refuge in the bunker, according to a clock that I spied hanging on the drab gray wall. Now us survivors were gathered down the corridor of the entrance to the bunker, in a large hall with many seats with various rooms to our right and to our left, all illuminated by LED lights. Three of these rooms were military-style bunk bedrooms, another three were bathrooms, two were rooms stocked with supplies, one was a security room, and another was a kitchen. There was even an entertainment room, with a pool table and two arcade machines. A distress signal had been sent out to the park's control room, but apparently we had gotten no response as of yet, according to the security guard. For the time being, I sat down in one of the metal chairs beside Hope, just waiting. We weren't alone in this either. It seemed that no one wanted to accept the possibility that we would have to be here for a protracted period of time. Most of the people who had phones tried to make calls to somebody from the outside world for help, but this availed them nothing. There was no reception down here, much to the frustration of these poor souls.

Then came a sound, the sound of a voice that started out faint but then grew in volume. It came from past the corridor; it was coming from the entrance. The second time I heard it I could make out what it was saying quite clearly.

In fact, I heard it so clearly that the words of the soft feminine voice seemed to rend my soul with their plea:

Somebody help me!

Immediately a banging on the door followed. Everyone's heads perked up after that.

There was something in that voice I recognized, but Hope recognized it sooner than me, as she arose from her chair, tearing up as she cried out, "Maria!!!"

My eyes widened. Could it really be?

The voice responded in turn, "*Somebody help me!*"

When I heard those words repeated, I knew something was...off. This voice sounded like Maria, but *deep down I knew it wasn't*. The sound was uncanny; it sounded *almost* exactly like her, accent and all, except for a slight difference in word delivery. I am no linguist, but it was enough for me to recall how she talked to know what her voice *should* sound like.

But Hope did not pick up on this, as she impulsively ran forward to the door, and I followed right after her.

I heard the voice of the boat captain commanding a seemingly turbulent crowd, evidently concerned by the scene we created, to calm down; looking behind me, I saw the guard chase us.

"Don't open the door Hope!" I called out to her.

She was too caught up in her desire to save her friend, and so my words seemed to fall on deaf ears as she ran up to the door.

Catching up to her, I stopped myself only a few steps away from her and breathed a sigh of relief. Looking over to the console next to the door, I remembered that without entering the password which only the guard knew, there was no way that door was going to open.

Hope stood there, pitiful and pathetic, as she began to bang on the door and call out to whoever was on the other side.

Poor girl.

Moving forward, I reached out with my right arm and tugged on hers. She pivoted her head and looked into my eyes, clearly saddened. But I also detected anger in her expression, anger probably directed at me for trying to stop her.

Attempting to mollify her, I spoke to her in a soft but grim tone and said, "It's not her Hope," and choking up a little, I continued, "It's not Maria."

A look of confusion came over her tear-strewn face. I heard footsteps behind me. "I'm going to need the two of you to step away from that door," the guard sternly warned.

"No problem," I responded. Turning to Hope, I pulled her towards me and told her, "Come on, let's go." She nodded, and slowly we walked towards the guard. He was a White American man who appeared to be in his mid-thirties, with balding brown hair that was partially concealed by his cap. I could see the urgency in his blue eyes as his expression started to soften, seeing that we were willing to cooperate.

Then another banging sound came from the door.

"Somebody help me!"

The voice was calling out to us again.

Hope was torn; I could see it in her eyes. I think she was starting to sense what I had sensed.

The guard's eyes widened, and he frantically motioned for us to come to him.

We followed him back into the main room, met by the curious eyes of the other survivors, who probably were just as spooked about the whole thing as we were. I noticed that by now they had split up into two groups, with one by the corridor and the other by the other end of the hall. The boat captain was seated by the corridor group. The guard had us follow him into the security room, and he pointed to a camera in the top-left of the rows of screens before us. It showed us what laid outside the door of our bunker.

"*Herrerasaurus*," he said in a hushed tone, as if the creature could hear him on the other end. There it stood only a few feet away from the door, facing it; there were two other individuals flanking this one further away in the bushes, closer to where the guards had been slain. Of them, I could only make out pools of blood and some ragged bits of cloth.

Only Hope dared to break the silence. She began, "How —"

Then the *Herrerasaurus* flickered its forked tongue and opened its jaws, crying out, "*Somebody help me!*"

A shiver rang down my spine as silence fell among us again.

"They can mimic speech, like parrots," the guard whispered incredulously to us as he looked away from the screen and towards Hope and I. He continued in that same tone and said, "I heard the stories from my colleagues, but didn't believe them. Not even the raptors are capable of this."

"So much for a *primitive* dinosaur," I remarked.

There was an uneasy silence after that.

So there was something they were covering up about these dinosaurs after all, I thought. What else could this place be hiding?

Considering the consequences of this revelation, I sensed the need to say something.

"We have to warn the rescue team. They'll be walking right into a trap if those things stay around," I implored. "After all, the *Herrerasaurus* probably consider this whole area their territory now."

The guard nodded. "That's a good point," he replied. "But," he added, "there is another way they access this bunker, through the backdoor that leads into the tunnel system. I'm going to inform them to reach us through that entrance, it's our best shot."

"How long do you think that could take?" Hope asked.

"Not sure," he responded. "I think it's best for you kids to relax. You've been through a lot today, to say the least. Let me handle this."

I nodded, and after thanking the man, walked out the door. Hope followed me, and we went back to our seats in one of the middle rows.

People eyed us with a little curiosity, but then returned to their conversations and whatever else they happened to be doing. Some music from the park's radio station was played, as an apparent strategy to drown out the noise coming from the door. The adventurous and safari-like tunes stood in contrast with our liminal surroundings.

Hope looked at me with a grateful expression on her face; I was delighted to see her smile again after she cried. "Thanks," she said, "You were right."

"You're more than welcome," I responded, though taken back a little. "We have to look out for each other, after all."

Moved to curiosity, she calmly asked, "What was life like for you back home? Before this place?"

"Well," I started. "Most of my life revolves around church really. That's my refuge from society, from 'the world'. My family doesn't really agree with me, but it could be worse. They are the ones who dragged me to the island."

Her stare seemed to inundate me as she nodded sympathetically, as I continued.

"I'm good at school I guess. Most of the subjects at least, Math is a real pain for me. I don't really have any friends there, so I kind of hate the whole thing. But I've met some great people at church, people I can truly call my friends."

In somewhat of a joking tone, I said, "Alright, what else should I tell you about? Oh, I know! Do you want to know my favorite color?"

Surprisingly, she giggled at this.

"Sure, John, sure," she answered in an amused tone.

"It's blue," I said, which was the real answer. "What's yours, Hope?", I asked a little more seriously, yet maintaining a playful attitude.

"Blue too!" she said with a smile and a laugh.

Looking around, I could see that our fun was attracting some attention, but I didn't care. I just wanted to be in this moment, with this girl.

I returned her smile, and asked her, "Now, what was life like for you, before you got here?"

"It was going good I guess," she said to me. "I have friends back home. Maria was one of them – she actually goes to the same school as me."

A sad and pensive expression came over her face, and then she continued, casting her eyes down.

“But none of my family came with me. I hope yours are alright.”

“Thanks,” I said. And then gently I whispered, “Maybe Maria is still out there, Hope. They could have heard her from a distance and started imitating her voice without her knowing about it.”

She looked up to me, and responded, “You really think so?”

“Yes,” I answered, “I really do. Don’t give up on your friend, not yet.”

She seemed consoled by my answer, but my victory was short lived. I felt a hand on my shoulder; looking to its source, I saw the guard from earlier with a concerned look on his face.

“Come with me, I need to speak with you for a moment,” he said, as if he was summoning me to the principal’s office.

I obeyed him, but not before smiling again to her, this new friend of mine. Following him into the security room, I scanned around the various screens, about ten in total. Most of the cameras seemed to have been placed either within the bunker or outside it; notably, I saw that the Herrerasaurus were no longer visible on the front camera. A great relief came over me at seeing this. But I also noticed that four of these cameras were filming areas further away from us. Three seemed to be stationed somewhere along the twists and turns we had passed by boat. The last caught my curiosity the most. It showed a gray metal gate made evidently for cars, now opened, between the line of fences separating the Bayou and the neighboring exhibit, *Triceratops Territory*. Through its opening I could faintly glance out into the plains of the Territory, but my lingering mind was swiftly brought back to its place by the guard.

“If you’re lucky, you’ll get to see that place for yourself and come back alive,” he commented with an air of dark sarcasm.

A little embarrassed, I turned towards him. Seeing he wished to continue, I allowed him to do just that.

“It seems I’ve lost contact with the team meant to rescue us, and with headquarters. Captain Rodriguez and I have kept the peace down here, and I don't see that changing,” he said.

“There’s no easy way for me to ask this, so here it goes: Are you willing to go into that tunnel for me,” and then after a slight pause he added, “for us?”

Worry came down upon me, but recalling my strange vision, I swelled up with courage.

“I’ll go. What needs to be done down there?”

"Well," he responded with a friendly smirk, "Glad you're stepping up." He then reached over to grab a brown-colored map from his desk, and passed it into my hands. Pointing to a part that read BUNKER 12, he said, "That's where we are right now," and then tracing his finger along one of the many paths made of rectangular pipes, added, "This is the route you'll be taking." Continuing on, he said, "The exit is through the backdoor. I'll unlock it for you. Go down the end of the hallway and take the elevator. There's going to only be one other level, so hit two. It'll bring you down to where you need to be. Walk from there to that vertical rectangle I just pointed out to you. It's a tower meant only for authorized personnel. I'll give you the passcode. When you get to the top, I want you to take note of how things are from up there. The city, the dinosaurs, you know. And then—". He paused. "Do you have a flare on you?" he asked with an air of sudden forgetfulness.

"It's in my backpack," I answered.

"Grab it then, and I'll give you a walkie and send you on your way."

I was more than ready, but I still had one question for him; curiosity would gnaw at me otherwise.

"Why did you select me?"

Smiling, he answered, "When I saw you and that girl all by yourselves on that shore, I knew there was something special about you. Based on what I overheard before our comms went down, it takes a real man to survive that green hell."

I thanked him with an expression that did not hide my sense of feeling both humbled and shocked.

"By the way, I forgot to ask you. What's your name?" he inquired.

I said to him, "It's John. Yours?"

"Raphael," extending his hand to mine, which I shook.

...

"I hope I'm not prying, but the girl who sat next to you, is she your sister?" he asked over the walkie-talkie as I continued down the dim grayness of the subterranean hallway.

"No, no," I responded with an air of levity.

"Is she your girlfriend?" he asked.

"Well," I stammered, "That's not true. I wouldn't go that far — we just met today, after all."

"Why not?" he asked.

Why is it your problem?

I was tempted to give him a tongue-lashing for asking such stupid questions. We had been chatting for a while now as I marched down the cold and rather dim hallway, and he had been only helpful to me before. Why did he sense the need to bring Hope into this?

No, I shouldn't talk to him like that.

I implored God to ease my temper, and an idea came to mind in a moment afterwards.

"It's a bit like this tunnel, Raphael. I don't really know what to expect with her until I reach the other side," I thoughtfully remarked.

"That's a way to look at it," he quipped in a pensive tone.

It was certainly an imperfect analogy, but it worked on some level. At the very least, it had ended this awkward digression.

As I continued my journey, I started to tune out the monotonous sound of my shoes hitting the gray industrial floor and re-imagined myself among some of the young boys of my parish, on a February day not long ago. I joined their game by accident; a snowball was flung at me as an invitation, to which I readily reciprocated. Laughter and joy kept us warmer than our coats could on that winter day. How I wished I could be among them again, rather than be in this place! After making a turn to the left, I finally found what I was looking for; another elevator and a sign beside it that read in blazing red font: "DINOSAUR MONITORING STATION #14 - AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY". A keypad was below it.

"I found it!" I said excitedly into the walkie.

"Great work!" he exclaimed on the other end.

"What's the code?" I asked.

He then read off the numbers, which I pushed into the keypad. A little chime sounded off and a green light flickered, signaling the opening of the elevator. I entered it, readying myself for whatever was going to meet me on the other side.

Swiftly I felt myself being carried to the top of this tower, and the moving ceased. The doors opened to a darkening sky and green terrain which gradually met the evening horizon. I stepped out, and a cool breeze disheveled my hair. The tower itself must have stood at about two stories tall. Directly in front of me was *Triceratops Territory*; though most of the paddock was plains, the parts bordering the fence of *Baryonyx Bayou* were covered in forest, and there was a small jungle in the near center of the plains. Closer to where I was laid a great river, which wended down the exhibit and went all the way to the seashore, which was to my left. I observed many dinosaurs congregating around the river, some crossing it, other simply

idling around it in their herds. Among them were several groups of *Triceratops*, but there was also a great presence of *Lambeosaurus*, large hadrosaurs colored in gold and white in a giraffe-like configuration, and a small herd of *Borealopelta*, a reddish-brown ankylosaur. I took in the seemingly mystical scene, when a grunt from below shook me.

Cautiously, I looked down from the railing, seeing nothing. Then, I moved quickly to the back side of the tower, the side that faced Eden City, which was separated from this region by a great canal-like sea that circled its interior. Above the crystalline tropical waters stood four symmetrically organized concrete bridges according to the four main directions. They were connected by another bridge that stretched and surrounded the exterior of the canal on my side of the gap, which allowed the park's extensive monorail railway system to reach the more remote parts of the island. The view of the city was even more haunting from this angle – the sheer destruction was more visible than before, and I watched with impotence as the flames continued to ravage the place. I could see that the aviary that stood on the coast, an immense ovular structure the size of two football stadiums, now had sizeable craters which bore through its lower part.

The glittering glass dome, mosque-like in its grandeur, which once encapsulated the exhibit stood no longer, evidently having collapsed inwards after whatever destruction had taken place. Various kinds of pterosaurs had escaped the wreckage – flocks of *Thalassodromeus*, *Pteranodon*, *Tapejara*, and *Rhamphorhynchus* among them – and were flying about and calling to each other. Some traveled in the direction of the coast, while the others were concentrated in this central region, targeting the waters of the canals for fish, of which there was plenty. From where I stood, I watched as numerous amounts of these creatures dove into the waters, and most returned to the sky with a catch. In the distant waters, a dark shape had breached the surface, causing the pterosaurs around it to scatter; sprays of water were sent out from the nostrils of a serpentine head, which I recognized as belonging to a *Rhomaleosaurus*, a pliosaur with a long yet bulky neck.

Though the tower was disguised by ivy and tall trees surrounding it, I could still clearly gaze into the ashen-colored street almost directly below me. There were pieces of wood and palm leaves (along with kinds of litter) strewn about as a result of the winds of the storm. Coming into sight, I saw about a dozen marching *Kentrosaurus*, small stegosaurus colored in a greenish-blue hue. It was a curious thing to see them knock over empty food stands with impunity, and to chew off the leaves of what were once solely “decorative” plants with no retribution from angry zookeepers or frightened patrons. I could not help but grin at the sight – there was something inexplicably enchanting about it.

Then a buzzing sound came from my walkie.

“John, are you there?” It was Raphael.

My eyes widening, I picked up and answered, "Yes, it's me. I'm in the tower – just got a little distracted, you know?"

He chuckled on the other end. "Sure, sure. Just make sure to fire off that flare."

"Got it," I said, and putting the walkie down, I pulled out my flare gun to do just that.

Facing Eden City, I raised my hand into the sky and fired off the gun. It hissed and spat out a trail of red-white smoke that flew into the sky. As it rose, so did my prayer for rescue ascend to the great dome above. Relief washed over me. Soon, it would all be over.

Chapter IX: Inferno

Minutes passed as I stared out into the ruin of Eden City, pitying the souls trapped within that horrible place. But I made sure to look around the valley, alert for any response to my distress signal. Though there were quite a few pterosaurs in my immediate vicinity, thankfully they did not seem bothered much by the strange light. Only the few closest to the blaze flapped their wings and dove away in fear. Raphael had told me to stay put in the tower, until nightfall at least – he already knew about the desperate case of the city, but he figured that by now, *somebody* would show. Maybe it would be *Pansauria's* security forces with whom we had lost contact; or perhaps some kind of outside expeditionary force sent in to restore order to the island. Aside from the Philippines (since this island fell within their jurisdiction by technicality), the two most likely candidates were either the United States or China. Or perhaps, as he had indicated to my curious mind, mercenaries would be sent in to do the job. In any case, we hoped that help would come soon; no doubt the souls within Eden City were united with my group of survivors and myself in this.

When I could spot the unmistakable shape of a military helicopter in the distance, emerging from the smoke of the city and growing larger as it flew *in my direction*, I felt as I had been lifted in the air. Like an excited child, I switched on my walkie-talkie and ecstatically told Raphael the great news. I could tell by the relieved tone of his voice that he was no less excited than I was.

The pterosaurs in the immediate vicinity quickly parted and made way for the helicopter as it speedily flew over the monorail bridge, and the vehicle started to slow down as it came towards me. Sensing my cue, I spread out my hands and waved; I could see an armed rifleman sitting in the open bay of the helicopter notice me, his expression behind his sunglasses changing as he pointed in my direction. I had been seen!

The helicopter lowered itself to my position – my rescue was here!

Like a comet, an orange-red flame appeared from the distance and struck the side of the helicopter; it had been hit with a missile! As quickly as it had come, it fell, hitting the pavement below with a grinding crash, bursting into fire. I stood back in horror and fell, as I felt the heat of the explosion seemingly encase me.

Stunned, I arose after a minute, though still quaking in fear.

How did this happen? I asked myself, and the answer came to me almost instantly. Evidently, I reasoned, there were people on this island who were just as deadly as the dinosaurs.

I was not the only one spooked by the slaughter. Moving over to the opposite side of the viewing tower on my knees, I confirmed with my sight what my ears were now hearing; sounds of panicking herbivores. A group of *Triceratops* formed a kind of wall around their young in defense, as some *Lambeosaurs* called and others ran, some into the jungle and others further ahead into the plain. The four *Borealopelta* waddled away cautiously. Though none of the animals were particularly close to the crash, it came to me that they were trying to respond to a threat that they didn't understand.

I wanted to update Raphael. But then I made a horrible realization – I had dropped the walkie-talkie in my fall!

So as not to be seen by any potential hostiles, I crawled my way back to the elevator, and on my knees, I punched in the number of the floor from which I had come. Not wasting any time, the door opened and I, relieved at least by this, went inside and punched in my destination.

In short order, I was back in the tunnels. Consulting the map Raphael had given to me, I made a decision. There was a connection to the park's subway system I could travel to through these tunnels, and if the subway was still working, I planned on using it to get into Eden City. Though the very thought of entering that place was daunting to me, I recalled the strange vision I had received, which was only becoming further proved by the events of the day. Moreover, I understood that despite the fact that this option was riskier than going back to Raphael, it was ultimately the better choice. Though I had no idea of who launched the missile, it was reasonable to assume that they had seen me, and that such a person wasn't a lone actor. Somebody armed would be coming for me, and I couldn't lead them back to the bunker with all those defenseless people. If I could survive Eden City, I could also find some way to get into contact with Raphael and the outside world. I could thereby kill two birds with one stone, as the saying goes, by warning him of this new threat and calling for rescue. Another thought came to me along these lines: considering that the city was the nexus of the island, the rescue operations from the outside were going to be concentrated there first.

All of these potentials ran through my head, as I traveled down the lonely cold hall, eventually finding the station I was looking for. It was a drab looking place, but thankfully one still in order – a subway train came within minutes of my arrival. It was an eerie thing to board, considering I was the only passenger. Usually they were crowded with tourists, as I had experienced earlier that day. As the doors closed, the automated train began its journey. I prayed an *Ave* for a safe voyage and I found myself renewed once more. When I looked up, I saw that the train was going through an underwater channel, designed like a massive shark tunnel covered with glass on the sides and on the ceiling. A group of dolphin-like *Ichthyosaurus* swam on my right, and all around I saw various schools of fish and giant

ammonites. Glancing above, I saw the ominous shade of a *Kronosaurus*, a sea reptile with a crocodile-like head. Examining this creature, I watched as one of its flippers brushed aside a lifeless human corpse that was sinking to the bottom of the canal. A coldness came over me that would be appropriately felt in an ice rink, not in a stuffy subway train car.

Shortly after this unnerving sight, the subway train moved again into a more conventional tunnel, as it took me into Eden City. After a few minutes, the train came to a halt.

From the window, I perceived the flickering of the lights in this new station. Cautiously, I stepped off the train only seconds after the doors slid open, and took a deep breath in as the uncanny nature of this vacant space pressed itself upon me.

No use in waiting around here...

After rummaging through an abandoned information booth, I was able to find a map of the city. Though I did not have a clear destination in mind, it would at least help me navigate the place. I had been here some hours before, true; but given the scale of this Babylon and the intervening events since then, it would be relying too much on luck for me to get around the city on mere memory. Moving up the stairs that led to the intersection of the main highway and the canal's edge, foul smells struck my nose as a scene emerged before my eyes that astounded me beyond all dismal expectation. Scents of death polluted the air and smoke rose to the sky, as I saw a dead *Parasaurolophus* strewn beside the corpses of a crowd of men and women. Looking to my right and to my left, I saw that there was seemingly no one or nothing watching, and so I stepped closer to that scene, which hauntingly invited me to inspect it.

Running my eyes down the bloodied body of the hadrosaur, and the bodies of the twenty or so poor souls around it, I saw something that I did not anticipate. All had the unmistakable marks of bullet wounds.

I felt my eyes widen. *No dinosaur could have done this*, I realized.

Then a verse came to me: *An enemy hath done this*. Chills ran down my spine, but I moved forward and left, recommending myself to God – I had to.

But I could not escape neither the smell or sights of death. All around me the stench of blood rose to the sky, and bodies of dinosaurs and man littered the wide streets. Cameras looked down on the scene in their mechanical silence, as vines and trees that hung from the white colored skyscrapers cackled as they burned. To my left, I saw the outline of a deceased *Allosaurus*, colored yellow with black leopard-like spots, sprawled out like a vanquished dragon beside what, mere hours ago, had been a lively playground. The decorations, resplendent with goofy and colorful dinosaur statues, juxtaposed themselves against the carnivore's corpse. And I was not the only living creature among this ruin – packs of marooned colored *Coelophysis* bit and tore at the bodies. Spotting one clamping down on a

lifeless man's nose, I almost flew into anger at the carnivore as I picked up a piece of rubble and prepared to hurl it at the wretch. But prudence made me pause.

There would be no use in provoking that creature and its twenty or so family members which could easily surround me from all sides of the road. I was here to help the survivors; I couldn't do that if I allowed myself to be killed. Finding the road's dead end and a pedestrian area before me, I pressed on past the uninterested swarm and past the shattered gift shops and restaurants, towards the center of the city.

Using my map, I decided upon going only a little further for now, settling on the destination of an apartment complex located on the right side of the path. The signs of carnage decreased the further I went, giving me some hope of finding *somebody* before night fell.

Finally, I came upon an intersection within sight of my destination, the towering complex which proudly rose above the shops, arcades, and other amenity buildings which populated the deserted street. My plan was dashed once I heard the frantic steps of many feet – sounding almost as weighty as human steps, but not quite. Craning my neck to peer down the left street to find their source, I saw what they were: a horde of *Struthiomimus*! There was no time to think – I could make it to the other side, if I was fast enough.

Breathing in, I rushed across the pavement. Through my peripheral vision, I could see the proverbial whites of their eyes. There was still time.

Incredibly, I dashed through the open doorway of a chocolate shop before the stampede reached me.

What were they doing? What were they running from?

Then I saw the answer to my confused mind as I counted one, two, three, no – four Utahraptors race behind them. These creatures were man-sized carnivores covered with downy feathers, their pelts colored gray in some and brown in others, like wolves. One swiftly lunged and grabbed a straggling *Struthiomimus* with its muscular arms, impaling the slim herbivore with sharp talons. After revealing a row of teeth, the raptor simultaneously clamped down on its prey with powerful jaws and used its momentum to tackle the fleeing ornithomimid to the ground.

Sensing the imminent danger, I swiftly jumped over the counter to hide. After a few moments, I raised my eyes only a little, hearing no signs of footsteps approaching my location.

Though my visibility was limited, I saw that only the raptor which had made the kill remained. The *Struthiomimus* was now well and truly dead, its slender neck oozing with blood as the creature's two cold, lifeless yellow eyes faced in my direction. With one foot

lifted on top of the corpse, the raptor surveyed the street, as if suspicious of the concrete jungle.

The others must have continued their hunt, I reasoned. But now it looks like I'm stuck with this one.

Staring ahead, I held my breath and considered my next move.

Chapter X: Among the Ruins

As I saw the *Utahraptor* before me, I felt a tug on my shirt from behind that pulled my attention away from the grisly sight. Spooked by the immediate motion, I turned to face the source of the new sensation – only to be greeted by a small boy who looked just as scared as I was. Beside him, I noticed a little girl and two other boys, all taking refuge behind the counter. I noticed that the boy who I had seen first was fair-skinned with blonde hair and green eyes. The girl was White as well, and had black hair with brown eyes. On the other hand, the two boys next to her appeared to be brothers, both being ginger-haired and possessing blue eyes. Though I could not know for certain, I guessed by each of their appearances that while none of them were toddlers, neither were older than eleven.

Questions began to race through my head. How did these kids happen to be the only survivors I had come across in the city? How long had they been hiding here? Where were the adults, and furthermore, *where were their parents?*

Amid these troubling concerns, something definite crossed my mind and animated my soul with a new vigor. A duty to protect these children weighed itself upon my shoulders, a duty that overcame the fear that dominated me only seconds before.

I saw the boy's lips tremble as he tried to say something to me, but when a scaly footstep crunched something laying on the floor only a few feet away from us, he stopped.

The raptor was coming inside!

I could tell that the creature was dragging something, by the sound of it pulling some weight into the store. There was also the palpable stench of death which overpowered the much more agreeable scent of chocolate that once permeated the store. Needless to say, it disgusted us all, but confirmed to me that the raptor was bringing the *Struthiomimus* carcass inside.

Observing my surroundings, my eyes darted around as I looked for something, *anything*, that could be used as a weapon. The hint of a bright red cylinder that hung on the wall behind the little girl gave me an idea. Fixing my gaze upon her and pointing, I tried to communicate to her and the other two boys, all of whom were becoming increasingly distressed. The boy to her right seemed to understand me, and reached over to grab the fire extinguisher with the help of the others.

A plopping sound was then heard in the store – the raptor had set down its kill.

Though visibly shaken by this, all of the children worked together to pass the fire extinguisher into my hands, careful not to make any noise in the process. As this was

happening, a crashing sound rang out in the store's lobby. By the proximity of the disturbance, I could tell that it was coming closer to the counter; my heartbeat raced in response.

I didn't know what this creature was going to do if it found us unprepared, and I didn't want to find out. I *had* to strike first.

Raising myself from beneath the counter and fumbling with the fire extinguisher, I stood and saw, only a few feet from myself, the turquoise eyes of the *Utahraptor* staring down at me from behind its blood-covered snout. There was no time for me to think. As if on instinct, I pressed down and released the fuming chemicals in the direction of the carnivore, which immediately recoiled at the new painful sensation. Flaying its three fingered forearms around, almost like a man attempting to remove something from his eyes, it was effectively paralyzed for the moment. The wretch began to seemingly call for help, issuing several guttural reptilian sounds that struck me – but I knew I had to act. Looking across the street, I saw that things appeared clear; a choice had to be made. Either to stay and beat the creature to death, or to move out of this shop and back onto the street – and from there, take the children to find a better refuge. Both had their risks, but making my decision quickly yet with prudence, I perceived the last to be more worthy than the first.

Dropping the fire extinguisher and taking the boy next to me by his arm, I spoke, looking at him and the others. With compassion, I told them to come with me and that I would protect them. Though they were scared, they trusted me, and only moments afterwards we ran out of that chocolate shop. As the world seemed to blur around me as we made our way into the vast street, I kept my feet firm and turned the corner with my group, taking the right-hand side of the street towards the apartment complex I had planned on reaching before this detour. Without any interference from dinosaurs, we burst through the doors. The once vibrant lobby was now a dark room with flickering lights, devoid of souls beyond our puny band.

While I was inspecting the area, one of the boys yelled, pointing in the direction of the glass doors we'd just passed through.

“Raptor! Raptor! He's coming!”

I looked back, and saw what he was warning us about. The other children must have stared briefly and then ran to the back of the lobby, while I stood dumbfounded. It was the *Utahraptor*, charging at me, at us, with eyes fuming and irritated. And this specimen was not the only one, for its fellow pack members now surrounded the complex's exterior.

Reverently I called upon the name of Jesus; suddenly, the shape of a larger carnivore came into view beyond the wall of glass. By its mighty presence, it started to scare away the pack

and impelled the creature I had injured to halt. Although the carnivores outnumbered it by four to one, they had met a creature more than their match. The beige and soft gray patterned *Acrocantnosaurus* used its towering height and deep, threatening growls to force our would-be assailants away.

Taking advantage of the unexpected, I called the children to me and with them jumped over the receptionist's counter. After huddling them in a room that formerly operated as some kind of recreation room for the employees, I locked the doors and sat down with them. Noticing a refrigerator and some snack machines, I recalled that the last time I had eaten was in the bunker with Hope. With pensive sorrow, I remembered that scene, but did not dwell on it—I had other things to do. Though the refrigerator was empty, the machines still worked. After purchasing some snacks with some money I had on me, I presented them to the children, which they accepted. Their “meals” consisted of dino bars and brownies, sweets akin to their usual counterparts anywhere else, only differing in their unique branding. I ate similarly; unfortunately, we had no other options.

As we ate, we also took time to speak. I learned all sorts of things about them as they opened up to me, and to start, it was their names: the boy who I'd first seen was named Julian, the one who had spotted the raptor was named Issac, and the last boy was called Michael. The girl was named Michele. Before I said anything about myself, they already must have known something was different about me, as I had said grace before eating. This was a custom seemingly foreign to them, by the puzzled looks I had read on their youthful faces.

I explained this to them, and other things about the Catholic religion they questioned me on. It amazed me at how little they knew, but that made me pity their ignorance all the more! Evidently they had been the products of worldly parents.

By the time we had finished our meager dinner, they wished to say grace with me. How could I have refused such a request? As I said those words, filled with faith, hope, and love, the stresses of the world faded away as I rejoiced internally.

We cleaned up; and after this, I found a landline phone in the room, which (quite unexpectedly, to my happy surprise) was working! Finding a list of important numbers taped to the wall by some cabinets where I stood, I found the line for park security once more and hoped for a different result from the last time I had called. Dialing the numbers, I breathed in as I took a brief look behind me, glimpsing the children as they played a game of chopsticks.

An answer on the other end of the phone grabbed my attention, as my eyes widened.

The gruff voice of a man spoke on the other end, and asked about my inquiry. Maintaining brevity, I related to him the location of our complex—I had seen the name on the map and faintly spotted it as it shone in gold lettering above the front entrance: Schwab Gardens. He

then proceeded to ask a question about where we gathered within the building, and I responded to him, informing him of the precautions I'd taken to fortify the area as best I could. There was, after all, no telling what else could be in this building with us.

The man replied, "Our boys should be there in a few. Hang tight with those kids, will ya?"

He then ended the call, and thus began a stretch of time that felt impossible to relate. We were not granted the dignity of a clock; yet it must not have been too long, because it was eventually interrupted by a pounding on the door from the left hallway.

Stepping up to the door, I was glad to see the face of an armed soldier and those of his comrades behind him through the glass. All were dressed in the gray and black fatigues of the Pansaurian security force, and they cradled rifles in their arms. Not wishing for there to be any delay, I opened the door and let the children go out before I followed. We were then escorted by our new guards to an APC camouflaged in white and gray, within which we gratefully took shelter.

The men took their positions inside the vehicle, and the driver started up the engine. Windows, small and rectangular, allowed me to see the ruined and defiled streets of Eden City as we traveled through.

...

Judging by the things I now saw out of the window, I could tell that we had reached the central plaza. Dusk was no more; night had fallen upon us, though it had only taken us a few minutes to get from Schwab Gardens (which was near the outskirts of Eden City) to the very heart of this new Babylon. A checkpoint of barricades and armed soldiers lay in front of us; we were swiftly let in, and then I saw that similar fortifications had been established along the other three paths which drained into this place. There was a whole camp set up here, and cages of varying sizes now crowded much of the formerly vast and open space. Even from my rather limited viewpoint, I could tell that many of them were occupied, containing a single animal (or multiple, for the smaller gregarious creatures). Military and transport vehicles were parked near where the APC parked, a makeshift lot that led into a maze of cages, crates, and tents illuminated by diminutive variants of floodlights. Beyond that I could make out the building that housed the park's amphibian inhabitants, strange creatures such as *Diplocaulus* to *Beelzebufo*, which was joined to the western road I had once traveled down to see *Parasaur Pasture*. Men went in and out of that building, carrying cages, undoubtedly to evacuate its residents.

The soldiers were the first to exit the vehicle. After myself and the children put our feet on the ground once more, they led us into camp.

Along the way, I observed the strange assortment of men and creatures which now surrounded me. In one tent I saw men and women in fatigues play games of chance, which disgusted me. In another, I saw doctors tending to the wounded, though these all seemed to be military casualties. Hearing *Coelophysis* cries, my head immediately swung down to their source, to find a cage that held a group of five of the dinosaurs. To my fascination, I saw a mighty *Stegosaurus* enclosed in a much larger cage to my left, colored in mottled shades of green and with plates textured in a deep shade of gold; under different circumstances, I would have stopped to observe it. Soon I saw another tent, this one with a bunch of men seated facing what looked to be a higher ranking member of their army briefing them on some mission, pointing to a map of the island for reference. Given our pace and the other noises of the camp, I didn't hear much of what he was talking about, so I could only guess. Only a few steps further, I saw an *Allosaurus* asleep and confined as its cage was lifted up via crane onto the back of a truck. Beside this truck, there were four intimidating containers which – to my surprise – held the *Utahraptors*, now tranquilized. Among these I was able to identify members of other dinosaur species that had been captured, some I recognized from earlier that day such as *Kentrosaurus* and *Parasaurolophus*, but also ones I had not yet seen, like the theropod *Cryolophosaurus* and the tiny ceratopsian *Psittacosaurus*. I even managed to spot a *Struthiomimus* behind the bars of a cage here and there. Faintly remembering what I knew about the park, all of these creatures seemed to be escapees from enclosures in Eden City and the region that bordered the canal. None were from the more remote parts of the island, such as the *Wild Wonders* trail and *Triceratops Territory* in the North, or *Sauropod Safari* in the South. That, of course, assumed that dinosaurs were not migrating into the city, something that was reasonable, but perhaps not absolutely correct.

Finally, the soldiers led us to the entrance of *Pansauria's* corporate office building. The structure appeared as if it had made entirely out of the kind of tinted glass one would see on a limousine. The only thing which interrupted this shady appearance was the presence of trees that grew from a porch here and there, along with long shaggy vines which covered some of the glass.

An odd choice, I thought. But maybe this is the nearest evacuation route.

Or maybe it's the only evacuation route.

Passing through the tall and vast lobby, I was shook from this unnerving thought by a deep growling noise – one that came from a life-size *Tyrannosaurus* hologram in the center of the room. I breathed in relief, and entered the elevator with the rest. Given the immense size of this skyscraper, it had many floors. But when I saw one of the soldiers press the button for the thirty-third floor (the highest of them all), I sensed something ominous.

As the elevator rose, myself and the others could gaze out into the wasteland of Eden City as the haze dissipated the higher we went into the sky. But it never was quite high enough for it to go away entirely. The night was no longer illuminated by the iridescent and neon lights that would have dominated the skyline under normal circumstances. People, misguided as they had been, had placed so much trust in this place – some more than others. I thought of the lives destroyed and the lives that still hung in the balance as the scene below became gradually smaller and smaller, until I was jolted by the sudden halt of the elevator.

Chapter XI: Death to the World

When we finally reached our destination, my heart sank as one of the soldiers took me aside and ushered me away from the group. After I turned to wave to the children, who looked saddened to see me go, the man whispered in my ear and told me someone very important wanted to see me. My brow furrowed, but I didn't bother pressing the inevitable question about what made me so special – instead, a strong desire animated me to tell this important somebody about the survivors in the bunker, find out about what happened to my family, and (of course) get off the island.

Considering that the soldiers worked for him, he probably was associated with somebody trying to clean up this mess, after all. But I wouldn't have long to think, I was soon shown into an open executive office with this person. I was faced with a man who appeared to be in his thirties and dressed in fatigues like those of the soldiers. He seemed, however, to be of an elevated rank, given that he wore a black beret with an emblem of a red-colored Greek helmet impressed upon it.

"I am honored to meet you," he said, taking my hand into his. His eyes, brown like mine, glimmered with approval.

"Tell me, what's your name?" he asked.

"John," I responded. "What's yours?"

"Call me Commander Garibaldi," he replied. "I'm in charge of the Pansauria Security Force."

"As you can tell," he said while gesturing his hand to his right towards the large, wall-like glass panes, "we have had a pretty busy day."

I managed to hide a frown with difficulty as a thought struck me:

Garibaldi – he's named after that marauder?

After a momentary pause, he said, "Not many young men could have done what you did today."

"Thank you, Commander," I said, at a loss for any other words. It felt good to hear that, though humility brought me to remember that I didn't come here through efforts solely my own.

"Take a seat," he continued, gesturing towards the chair in front of the desk he sat at moments before.

I nodded and did as I was told.

Before I could ask him anything, he spoke again.

"You have had a busy day, haven't you John? I mean, nobody should have to go through the kind of things you've been through. I can only guess at the kinds of things you've had to see," he paused and then finished, "*out there.*"

"We were able to locate you and the people you were with using some of the cameras that still work, but it wasn't easy," he said, "especially with the storm."

"People?" I repeated, confused. "When did your rescue team start noticing me?"

"Since your stop – and a traumatic one, I imagine – at the South bunker in *Baryonyx Bayou*," Commander Garibaldi replied. "I will give it to those rescuers, it was a smart move to halt the boat there, given *what they knew*; it's unfortunate that the company kept the location of the Herrerasaurs secret, no? Maybe if they had known, they wouldn't have set you guys down so close to their paddock."

I nodded in response. Sensing him anticipating more questions, I asked something which had been weighing on me for some time.

"Where are my parents and my brother? Are they safe?" I implored.

"That they are," he answered promptly. "They were lucky to get out of here when they did – they got out on the first boat."

At those words, it was hard for me to contain my happy relief. But after a wide smile, my expression faded back into worrying, as I considered the fate of those who were still stuck here.

"You said something about a first boat," I said. "Have there been any more? Will there be any more?"

"There will be," he said with a pause, his voice trailing off a little.

His placid expression seemed to break a little. Then he continued, "But there are some complications with that at the moment. Currently, we are trying to gather in whoever we can and secure any and all landing zones. We've got troops spread across the island looking for survivors and escaped dinosaurs."

He must have guessed what I was going to ask next, as he added, "Those kids you rescued, by the way – don't worry about them, they're in good hands."

This was also another revelation which was very pleasing for me to hear, and I was increasingly trusting Commander Garibaldi by the minute.

“Which,” he said, “takes me to the subject of your friends over at the bunker. We are going to send in a team to rescue them.”

“And,” he said demurely, “we would like you to come with us, if you wish.”

I nodded hastily. Though the events of the past several hours had certainly taken their toll on me, I didn’t want to just sit around and wait to be rescued. I wanted to do something – I wanted to help anyone and everyone I could.

“Yes, I’ll come with you,” I said with firm conviction.

“Good,” the Commander said with a look of satisfaction. “But John, I need to know – have you fired a gun before?”

“I have,” I replied.

Smiling, I recalled proud and happy memories of outings spent with friends from church. They had taught me how to shoot, and though I was not a particularly great shot, I was grateful for their informal lessons; they would certainly come in use now.

“Excellent,” he responded. “However, I would like to get you warmed up. After all, it’s probably been a while since you’ve practiced, right?”

I nodded.

“That’s what I thought,” he continued. “So, let’s get you prepared – we will do our best not to run into anything out there, but as I am sure you know by now, this island has a way of throwing all sorts of surprises at you.”

“Come with me,” he said – it was a command, but was spoken as if it were a kind invitation.

Commander Garibaldi stood up, and I followed. We walked out of the room and back into the chalk-white hallways decorated with the occasional plant or poster here and there, myself trailing behind him.

We came to the elevator, and he tapped the button for the first floor. The descent was swift like the ascent; yet when the lights and sights of the camp below came into view once more, time seemed to slow as I stared in awe.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” he said to me.

“Yes, it certainly is,” I responded softly.

“What you’re witnessing is what happens when men come together to restore order to a lawless world,” he asserted with boundless confidence. “Only several hours ago – while you were in the jungle – this place looked like a scene from Hell.”

“It still kind of does,” I blurted out.

There was a pause – I nervously wondered if the Commander took offense to this.

“Well then,” he elaborated, “it was only worse than it is now. Just imagine what it must have looked like, sounded like, smelled like. You only got to see the aftermath. Carnage everywhere. The sound of rain and thunder, the sounds of all those screaming people – and the dinosaurs too. You wouldn’t believe how many times we had to use lethals to put them down, tranqs would have taken too long. Pure chaos. And that was, mind you, while the power grid had been struck down. We’ve been able to get some things running since then, but it took us some time.”

Lethals, I thought, confusion coming upon me. Like what happened to the parasaur? Then why were all those people –

“I know,” I said in a somber tone. “I heard it from the jungle.”

“So you knew...” he said, his voice trailing off.

Sooner than I expected, the elevator came to a jolt and it opened.

I was led behind the main hall, down the hallway to another room. Peering through the window of its door, I realized it must have served as a conference room; it was certainly large enough.

Commander Garibaldi opened the door for me, and let me go in. There was a guard to the right of us, who handed him a pistol, which the Commander proceeded to give to me. I would have been grateful, had I not spotted the sight laid before my very eyes.

There were no targets; three figures knelt on the ground, about ten or so feet in front of us, facing our direction. They were gagged with bandannas and bound at the wrists and feet, but their faces were uncovered.

Two young men, and a young woman; all three appeared to be my age. The girl was a brunette with green eyes and was fair-skinned. One of the young men was evidently Hispanic, brown-haired with brown eyes, while the other was a White man, blonde with blue eyes. Their faces were doused in tears, and I could see the terror in their eyes. This disfigured their otherwise pleasant, though average appearances; I could imagine them among the halls of my high school with ease. Unlike me, they would probably fit in just fine.

I was so moved to pity, that the voice of the Commander whispering into my ear shook me out of my shock.

“John,” he said – though his voice almost sounded different, as if not entirely his own. The cool sensation of the pistol being placed into my quaking hand was followed by his voice

“Do it,” he instructed softly. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“No, it can’t be,” I said, my voice stammering.

“It is,” he responded. “Do you know, John, what these people were doing when you were fighting for your life out there in the jungle? Hiding, like the cowards they are.”

“I don’t understand,” I replied, feeling quite lost.

“You will, allow me to explain,” he continued. “Unlike you – who bravely rescued those kids – they chose to lock themselves in the gift shop next to some river ride, while they watched people die from the security of their shelter.” He breathed in and sharply remarked, “They did nothing to help anyone but themselves!”

“We have the tapes, kid –” he said, sensing my hesitation, “and some of my men were there, they saw the carnage; they would tell you.”

“You and your men were behind it,” I said, suddenly finding courage to speak. “All those dead people by the station – they had been shot. I saw their bodies.”

“Well,” the Commander said, as he stepped back. “Those people were urbanites, cosmopolitans – good for nothing scum without honor, genetic dead ends who only hold humanity back. The rest were...collateral damage.”

Before I could say anything in response to this, he said, “Look. I know it sounds shocking, but it’s true. Trust me, I’ve been in my job since this place opened five years ago. My men and I have dug up the data – do you want to know, for instance, how many of these people were taking SSRIs in this supposed paradise?”

He looked at the three in front of us, and waved his hand, “All of them are on that list already. They, like the others, should be eliminated. They are unfit, and we are fit for survival.”

“Fit for survival? No,” I said, shaking my head. “They don’t have to be this way. They can change. And who are you to decide who lives and who dies? Aren’t you supposed to be protecting the people who come here?”

“I gave up on that part of the job a long time ago,” he explained. “The people of this island – corporate, the tourists, the residents...they’ll destroy whatever misplaced faith you have in humanity. At least the kind of humanity that this place wants to promote, that is.”

“Point is,” he continued, “I realized that I couldn’t allow this insane cohabitation experiment to go on—it would have destroyed us all in the end. This place claims to promote respect for nature, but in reality it does the opposite. Cosmopolitans drunk on their smugs of superiority, sipping their margaritas as they watch these incredible animals from behind the best fences and walls of glass that money can buy – it’s insufferable to witness that even once, let alone almost every day for several years. That’s why I have been planning a little experiment of my own for quite some time, but the storm gave us the perfect opportunity.”

“And what was that?” I asked, horrified.

Though I could guess the answer, I could not stop myself from making this inquiry; I had just found out that Commander Garibaldi was a fascinating man, albeit one terribly wrong.

“Letting the dinosaurs run loose,” he answered with a smirk. “Come on, you couldn’t guess that one by now?”

“I—I could,” I responded. “But I just wanted to know for sure.”

“Now you know,” he replied.

“How did you do it? How did you get all your men to follow you?” I asked in a tone of confusion.

“Not all of my soldiers are security force. A good portion of them are actually mercenaries—I had to pay a fair price for them, but it was worth it. However, securing the loyalty of the force wasn’t easy. Some needed convincing, while others didn’t,” he answered. “They had already seen the things I had seen, and so understood what needed to be done. And those who disagreed....” he trailed off.

“...Were dealt with, let’s just say.” he concluded.

The sight of the helicopter being blown up before me flashed before my eyes once more.

Suddenly, Commander Garibaldi’s visage changed to a darker expression, as he seemed to look behind me to his soldier at the door.

He breathed in. “We are running out of time, and I have entertained discussion with you for too long,” he said to me, frustrated.

“Steady your hand, and shoot them now,” he commanded in a dry tone.

“I won’t. I will not...” I replied, looking at him in the eyes determinedly.

“I’m not joining you in your crimes. I would rather die than offend God, because He has saved my life,” I said.

"God?" he said, as if in shock. "These people offend, *outrage* your God and you want to spare them?"

"Yes, I do," I calmly responded. "God gave me a chance not too long, even though I didn't deserve it. It is easy for you to judge them – they were scared, but now they're guilty. I pity them."

"Try telling them that," he answered in a patronizing tone. "All your high minded God talk, it flies over their heads. And frankly it flies over mine too. These runts are dooming us with their irresponsibility, don't you see? Nature has selected against them. Your mercy is misguided – it will destroy us all, taken to its logical conclusion."

Commander Garibaldi paused for a few moments and frowned, sensing my hesitance.

Deciding on a different approach, he leaned in close to whisper into my ear, and in a compassionate tone, said, "Besides kid, if you stare into the faces of these runts long enough, you'll see the faces of your bullies sneering right back at you."

"Bullies? That's a big assumption, Commander," I responded in an injured tone.

He leaned back as if struck, but maintained his confidence.

"My assumption is not without reason, is it? I guessed as such from the conversation you had with Hope in the bunker; seeing was not the only thing those cameras allowed us to do," he replied. "I am not trying to shame you. I am only giving you a chance for retribution."

A strong urge, like a kind of push of the wind, came over me to follow Garibaldi at that moment. The wounds of soul seemed freshly renewed as I remembered my troubles back home. The isolating feelings of unwantedness, the humiliation of derision, all of it; *all caused by people like them!*

The voice of reason pushed back. Rightly, it informed me that I could not really ascertain if the three *really* were like those other people. However, Garibaldi's option weighed more in my mind; it seemed so logically satisfying. I could choose to take out my pain on these three strangers, and no one would find out. Not Hope, not my parents, no one – except God that is, Who sees all.

I relented, and the fury started to fade, as I remembered the goodness of God. There were many lessons that flashed before me in what must have been mere moments. There was one, however, which stuck out. It was the one that I had learned from my encounter with the *Albertosaurus*, which seemed like a lifetime ago now.

"So I hope and pray they'll repent – not cut them down as if they're useless animals. It's not my place to decide if they live or die," I concluded.

"Then it is mine," he answered.

Yanking the gun out of my hand, he raised it; but I wrestled him for it.

Within seconds, he knocked my feet from under me, and I laid on the floor. The pistol remained in his hand, and was now pointed in my direction.

"Brave, but futile," he said, impressed. He pulled the firearm down, and motioned for his men.

"If you really think you're so above everyone else – why don't you test it out yourself? Go out in the jungle, and see if you'll make it out there, all alone!" I said in an aggressive tone.

"You've made a big assumption, kid," he responded as his eyes lit up in fury. "I fought in Afghanistan! You think I don't know a thing or two about what it really means to survive, to look death in the eyes?"

I was struck into silence after hearing this, and regret pierced me.

Perhaps I spoke too rashly...

Then he raised his voice and addressed his comrades, "Enough of this. Take them away!"

A soldier came in, and two more followed him. Promptly, the three were led out of the room.

I felt a wave of courage come upon me, as I rebuked this marauder: "You're worse than the people who built this Babylon!"

Sorrow welled up in my soul, as the Commander looked me in the face with anger once more and spoke.

"Don't worry, you're going with them. Evidently, it is no use trying to convert you," he said in a reproaching tone.

He proceeded to pull me from the ground, and grabbing my arm, led me out of the room.

Under the blackness of the night sky, we were dragged through the labyrinth-like camp towards the improvised lot I had seen earlier. Though I was still unbound, the pressure of Commander Garibaldi's firm hand on my shoulder communicated to me that running away simply wasn't an option. And even if I did, there was still the question of what would happen to the three. Moreover, a consideration even more horrible than this struck me: *what would become of the children?* God only knew; I was powerless to do anything but pray for them, at least for now.

As we passed by their cages, I glanced once more upon the subdued faces of the dinosaurs, and felt the irony of my situation. The humming of several military trucks caught my attention, as I briefly glimpsed the confined creatures being lifted onto them by crane, as I

had seen done with the *Allosaurus* before. Noticing more empty spaces in the camp than there were present before, it came to me; the dinosaurs were being moved, but where to?

None of the soldiers dared to do anything at the curious sight of seeing four teenagers being forced to march away from shelter rather than towards it. However, I realized that they, being legionnaires of Garibaldi, were by now attuned to watch things like this go on. Though it seemed like an impossibility, I knew that all was not lost. Within the depths of my soul, I knew that I could defeat this man, but ascertained that I had to bide my time. The eyes of Godfrey and Baldwin were upon me, and they would not abandon me.

....

It did not take long for me to find myself in the back of an APC once more, this time being restrained to my seat next to the three souls whom Garibaldi wanted me to destroy. From one of the thin rectangular windows, I glanced him climbing into the driver's seat. Commander Garibaldi would be coming with us on our destination, wherever that would be. And not only he—I saw two of the three soldiers take seats across from we were placed. They rested their assault rifles and expressed nothing under their black ski masks.

As we rode, I payed attention to the route. We passed through the North checkpoint, and though it was dark, I began to recognize buildings here and there as the vehicle sped forward. The only difference was that all the dinosaurs seemed to have been cleared out, in one way or another.

We were taking the way I had come! I realized.

With this thought, came the startling revelation that this was no mere chance decision. Remembering what he told me about his "rescue mission", I figured out that Commander Garibaldi was taking us to the South Bunker!

As I contemplated this, my eyes avoided the sight of the outside world and met those of my fellow prisoners, unable to speak. They looked even more frightened than before, though I knew they weren't afraid of me.

I didn't know what to say to them.

What could I even say to them? I thought to myself. And I struggled to find the answer.

There was no use in telling them where we were going; what good was that going to do?

Moreover, I shuddered to think what could happen to me if the soldiers saw me talking to them. Looking in their direction, I saw the dark eyes of those men stare back at me, utterly devoid of any sympathy. So I decided against it.

A jolting sound rang out, as the vehicle shifted on an incline for a moment and then stabilized. In concern, I looked out the window and found the answer to my worry. The APC was now on the monorail tracks!

Though I could see the murky waters below us, I could tell that the bridge was thankfully wide enough to carry the vehicle as it continued its voyage. The floodlights positioned on the borders of that vast man-made lake allowed me to glance, with chilling detail, the forms of the dark reptiles that swam below.

For a moment, a thought struck me about what would happen if we fell off course and landed in that sea of horrors. Before I could start contemplating whether we would die first from drowning or being torn apart by the inhabitants, I paused and turned my mind away from such useless speculations. Instead, I chose to recall how fortunate I had been to meet Hope earlier that day, and felt my fear dissipate.

As the APC moved closer to the other side of the bridge, I saw and felt the rocking of the vehicle as it moved down. We were firmly back on land, and I rejoiced in this, giving thanks to God that we had been spared the misery of a watery doom.

Interiorly, I prepared myself for whatever was to come.

Chapter XII: Exodus

Soon I felt the vehicle halt. Garibaldi had made a turn to the left, towards the entrance of *Baryonyx Bayou*. It was an imposing entrance to some extent: trees encompassed a guest queue which snaked this way and that, until it met under a wooden gate-like structure with a cartoonish blue-colored *Baryonyx* that looked out upon the now-empty space with lifeless yellow eyes. On the right and left corners of the gate there were lights, which unlike the street lights still worked for some reason. With distinctive black claws it held the first and last letter that spelled out the exhibit's name, which proudly read BARYONYX BAYOU in orange jungle-themed text.

As myself and the other captives were led out of the APC by the soldiers to a section of the pavement beside the queue's beginning, I noticed two other men with rifles standing there in the darkness a few feet from us. They were mercenaries, uniformed and holding rifles. Between them and pushed forward towards us was a girl, one my age from what I could tell.

My eyes lit up, as my attention was again drawn to her. She looked back at me with her brown eyes, evidently quite fearful. It was Maria!

Aside from some tears on her clothing, she seemed quite undamaged. Yet I read a deep sadness on her face. She had suffered much, as had I.

She produced a few tears; I think she recognized me, and I could not hide my sympathy.

The men saluted Garibaldi. He greeted them and after seeing my expression, looked over to the girl and asked, "What's her deal?"

"Found her along the trail, sir," answered one of the mercenaries, a Black man who stood to her right. "She was the only one we found. Muttered some stuff about a pack of black tyrannosaurs attacking her and some others before the storm."

Indeed, it was a pack...

Looking over to myself and gesturing, Garibaldi remarked, "Seems like these two know each other, Lieutenant." And then he added with an air of levity, "She comes with us. Best not to break up the reunion, right?"

The men smirked.

The Lieutenant then gave a shove to the girl, who then stumbled into our company.

"Commander, there's something else to report," the Lieutenant said.

"What is it then, Lieutenant?" Garibaldi responded.

"Team South spotted warships gathering on the horizon about fifteen minutes ago," he replied in a dire tone. "It seems like somebody's onto us. What are your orders?"

"Radio Juarez and tell him he's in charge for now," Garibaldi responded. "Forgot to do that before I got here."

"Yes sir," the man replied.

"You are dismissed, gentlemen," Garibaldi said. "Head back into the city before things get crazy over here. We're going on a private cruise; don't expect us to be gone for long."

The two men gave another salute, nodded, and then walked in the opposite direction towards the *Wild Wonders* trail, the entrance of which I could just glimpse at. It was a considerable distance away, probably about four hundred or so feet. Much further down that road laid the entrance to *Carnivore County*, a section which bordered the *Wild Wonders* trail and contained the paddocks for most of the island's carnivorous dinosaurs, such as *Albertosaurus* and *Dilophosaurus*. It was not visible from where I stood, owing to the darkness of the night.

The captives and I, now numbering one more on account of Maria, were funneled through the queue by Garibaldi and his henchmen until we reached the dock. It was made out of wood to give a more rustic feel, like something one would expect to see in Louisiana. Above us hung a tapestry of wood intermixed with plants; we were likewise encased by walls of the same design. Out on the lake which served as the loading bay for the tour, I saw several boats in sight, all the same as the *Baryonyx Bayou* boat I had seen hours earlier. One was docked directly in front of us, while two others were docked at a station to the left, by some kind of staff building.

Without hesitation, we were ushered onto this boat. All was quiet, except for the sounds of various insects, birds, and dinosaurs that emanated from the dark forest. No crowds of men, women, and children chattering about. No glittering TV screens telling us to do this and to avoid that before going on board. It was surreal, and humbling in a way. Nature had forgotten the worldly stage of this amusement park, and would (in time) consume this place.

One of Garibaldi's soldiers took to manning the wheel, while I was sat next to the other prisoners in passenger seats. The other three remaining men took their seats at the different corners of the seating area. Garibaldi, entered the cage after emerging from the captain's quarters, and then took a seat in front of us on our right hand side. Turning my head slightly in curiosity, I saw that one of the men noticed and fixed his gaze on me. Evidently, I was being watched in the event I tried to do anything contrary to the will of his master.

Despite this and other misfortunes, I was relieved to be behind the cage again. Perhaps, I thought, these misfortunes would not really be so in the end.

The engine started; my worry fluttered a little, but I kept my calm.

Something good will come out of this...

And as that thought passed me, the boat raced off into the left entrance of the jungle, which I could tell once served as the ride's exit.

...

The restless swamp teemed with activity as the boat continued forward at an increasing pace, until, suddenly, it started to come to a halt as it parked on the left bank of the river.

Garibaldi got up, pistol in hand and made his way to a small podium in front of the seating area. Standing there, he motioned to his men and had us brought to the door of the cage on the port side of the ship. Surprisingly, he ordered the three from Eden City to be unbound and ungagged.

"Now we will see who the true survivors are," he ominously remarked.

Only mere moments after this, an immense force struck the front of the boat. Garibaldi flew past us towards the middle of the ship and two of his men slid with him. Though we were also shook violently, each one of us managed to find something to grasp onto in order to keep our relative place.

What was happening?

I soon found the answer; to my right, I saw a dark shape emerge from underneath the vessel which moved swiftly to the back of the ship. The shape, about as long as our boat from what I could tell, powered forward using its immense ridged tail as it swam in an almost zigzag-like pattern. Exposed above the surface, monstrously large yellow eyes seemed to glow in the night as the creature paused. But this appearance was deceptive. Suddenly, it swung violently upwards, grabbing the bars of the cage. Now that its form was more clearly revealed, I could see by the moonlight that this animal was some kind of gigantic brownish-green crocodile with yellow highlights – *Sarcosuchus!*

The two soldiers beside Garibaldi panicked as they rushed to rescue their commander. But the crocodile tore through the bars with incalculable fury, rolling and biting as it did so. The power of this animal's violence was clearly more than what this ship was built to handle. Slowly but steadily, it was starting to sink as it was forced into a tilt towards the attacker.

The creature forced itself onto the ship, with its narrow snout leading the charge. The survivors and I were swung as the ship continued to shift. The remaining mercenary up front

cautiously but swiftly exited the cage and opened one of the doors to tend to the captain, who had been flung onto the floor by the impact and was now probably greatly bruised.

“Now’s our time! Let’s go, now!” I urgently informed my fellow captives.

The boat continued to jostle and shift while simultaneously everything seemed to slow and speed up at the same time. As they rushed out that door, my attention was forced elsewhere as I heard horrific agonies come from below. Looking in that direction, I saw the source; it was Garibaldi, now in the mouth of that monstrous crocodile. The other men had lost their rifles, which must have fallen into the water. One laid prostrate on the floor, unconscious. The other tried firing off a pistol at point blank into the creature’s face – but this only further angered the *Sarcosuchus*. The crocodile let out a loud hiss; a strange vibrating sensation tingled in my chest, as if I had been pushed by the voice of this incredible crocodile. Its jaws somewhat open, the creature made one swift yet powerful motion and clamped down on Garibaldi, making his cries cease.

I was snapped out of this spell as I saw the man’s lifeless body dragged away into the river, now bloodied. The boat only further continued to sink, now more rapidly than before.

I had to get out!

“Come on, John!” Maria cried.

And I listened, and ran out the door and onto the safety of dry land. The boat emitted a terrible sound as it sank into the river. Looking back, I and the others watched in stunned silence as the mercenaries either drowned or were consumed by a second *Sarcosuchus*, smaller than the other, which moved in to finish what the first had started.

But we had to move. There was no telling what would await us in the jungle, and standing around to find out would only hinder us.

Recalling the layout of the area from the map I had used hours ago, I realized that we would find the bunker if we headed north. That was going to be our best bet for shelter.

In a hushed tone I informed the others of what I knew, and they agreed with my plan. We set out, trekking through the ferns as the lively sounds of the jungle filled our ears. Our eyes and ears were alert for the slightest disturbance among the vegetation, any and all signs of a potentially dangerous dinosaur or even other mercenaries. I scanned the tree branches with my eyes, remembering that the Herrerasaurs were possibly still in this area, a fact I dared not to reveal to the others. Anxiety weighed upon us, each one their own Atlas holding up a tumultuous mind. Though it must have only been about ten or so minutes, the journey felt like an hour.

...

Leading the party, I saw the bunker some hundred or so feet in front of us; it was, to my happy surprise, illuminated by spotlights from above. Through the branches, I glimpsed that they emanated from two rescue helicopters bearing the Philippine flag. The others were quick to notice. Without hesitation, we ran forward and waved our hands; some of us even leapt for joy.

The helicopters hovered over the trees and then moved closer to the river. They let down ladders by the abandoned boat which remained in the water, a dormant reminder of events from many hours ago. Soldiers came down one by one, and set up a perimeter. Soldiers came down one by one, and set up a perimeter. Cautiously, we moved closer to them out of the cover of the trees, allowing ourselves to be seen.

A squad of ten armed men noticed us, and allowed us to join their company. We went up the small slope to the door of the bunker, which soon opened. The group of survivors were all there, including Hope, who rushed forward to greet Maria and myself. The excitement was palpable, yet everyone knew to keep quiet, for fear of what lurked in the dark. But our happy reunion was cut short, as we were promptly evacuated onto the helicopters and took our seats. An incredible relief came over as I watched the river and the jungle become ever more distant as we ascended into the night sky.

Over the sounds of the rotors, I was able to talk to Hope, Maria, and the others. I found out the names of the three from Eden City were Juan, Sebastian, and Clara, who were all grateful to finally speak to me. As much as I enjoyed speaking to these souls whom Providence had put into my path, a greater call came to me. Looking out of the window to gaze upon all those wonderful bright stars, I fumbled my rosary and whispered my prayers, tired but determined.

...

I was brought to the mainland with the others, to stay at a camp which had been rapidly organized to deal with the thousands of survivors that were being flown in from *Pansauria*. More than a few were taken to a nearby hospital on account of their injuries, while the majority stayed in this camp for only a day or several depending on the circumstances. Since my parents and brother had gotten off the island relatively early in the disaster, I was swiftly reunited with them. They apologized for everything; but I forgave them.

There were other happy reunions as well. In the afternoon of the following day, I got to see Issac, Julian, Michele, and Michael again. Their parents accompanied them, and they were ecstatic to meet me. I was a superhero to them all, but I maintained humility as we traded stories.

As it turned out, the mercenaries under Juarez had surrendered hours after I had been evacuated. They turned over all their prisoners and the dinosaurs they had captured to a joint military force, which was composed of troops from the United States, the Philippines, and China. Those three nations divided the island among themselves, and though great tension was raised over this, they managed to work together. In the month that followed, however, even their best efforts were not able to account for all the missing dinosaurs. Garibaldi had a contingency plan.

With reports springing up in various countries about dinosaurs in the wild, it seems like the world will never be the same as it was. But is that really to be feared? Every generation faces at least one great challenge, invisible or visible. Perhaps what shocks so many is that they do not realize this simple truth, that this world really is a valley of tears. Ironically, *Pansauria* was created in denial of that reality, which has come back to haunt us all. Yet, as in my case, good had come out of evil.