

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – OVER THE EDGE

“Fucking *dinosaurs!*”

Xavier paced furiously across the campsite as the others gathered their equipment. Logan and Gerald stood at the edge of the clearing while Miller and Eli shouldered their rucksacks. Eli sluggishly rubbed his temples and sat on his haunches. Sweat dripped from his dangling curls of hair. The sunlight chewed through the canopy and the air became hot and thick. It was a prelude of the unbearably humid day to come. Miller glanced at Xavier and raised an eyebrow.

“Seriously, Xavier? Dinosaurs?” Miller said.

“I’m serious!” Xavier spat. “I know what I saw; a pack of small dinosaurs outside the campsite, and then one really big one chased them all away. I think it was a T. Rex or something. Come on, you all heard those sounds in the distance! That wasn’t thunder!”

Miller crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. “I just can’t believe it, Xavier. I know how it is keeping watch. Your eyes play tricks on you and you see things that aren’t there. Hell, it could drive anybody mad--“

“I’m not crazy!” Xavier shouted. “Listen, it explains everything; the thing that attacked Ryan was a species of dinosaur, the game trails we saw from the helicopter were created by some sort of herbivores, and hell, the clearing we’re standing in now was probably created by them! I bet they eat whole swaths of forest at a time!”

“I found a tooth last night,” Eli said. He held it up for Xavier to see. “Take a look. It could be from that Rex or whatever, if it’s true.”

“You can’t be serious, Eli,” Miller said, shaking his head. “There’s gotta be a logical explanation. There’s no way there are dinosaurs in this valley. No way. I mean, there’s some weird shit going on here, but it’s not because of dinosaurs. That’s some stupid science-fiction pulp-magazine talk.”

Gerald bounced eagerly on his heels. “Come on, all this talk and only one thing matters; Ryan and Leon are missing. We need to go find ‘em and see what’s going on.”

A roar like blasting napalm reverberated through the jungle. The entire ecosystem shrieked in response. Birds burst through the canopy and spiraled through a reddening sky as shadowy fragments. Gerald and Logan went rigid and Eli jumped to his feet. Miller looked uncertainly at Xavier and gripped his M16A1. Frantic, high pitched screams drifted from the forest.

“Ryan and Leon,” Xavier said.

They briefly hesitated, then sprinted into the jungle.

The world blurred around Ryan as he charged mindlessly through an endless expanse of bamboo. Leon screamed behind him, and the father T. Rex bellowed tremendously. The mighty behemoth crashed through the jungle behind them. Bamboo cracked and crunched beneath its bulk. Thick reeds fell and struck the ground around Ryan like whipping rods. Damp breath rushed over his back and he screamed out of pure terror.

Ryan opened his eyes, and a branch swung for his face. He ducked, rolled beneath the branch, and scrambled to his feet. Leon shoved him forward and the T. Rex crunched a mouthful of reeds where they had been.

Ryan refused to look back, but he could still sense the dinosaur’s presence. The forest rocked with each ballistic step. The beast roared and copper-scented spit sprayed across the back of his neck.

The canopy rolled in turbulent waves as animals scurried away from the T. Rex’s swinging head and snapping jaws. Hundreds of animals were squawking and

screaming, tearing apart the tree tops as they fled. It was deafening. Ryan was overwhelmed by the chaos, thoughtless in his instinctual flight.

There was no hiding, nor fighting; running was their only option. Ryan and Leon were lost in the forest, veering far away from where their campsite had been. The ground sloped downhill toward the sound of the river. Ryan and Leon hopped across the dips in the earth as the T. Rex pushed through the clattering rods of bamboo.

Ryan looked over his shoulder and saw the T. Rex falling behind; it walked slowly downhill, as if it were afraid of twisting an ankle. Ryan was sure that if such a huge beast fell, there would be no saving it.

“Hurry, keep going downhill!” Ryan shouted. “Head for the river!”

“Can it swim?” Leon asked.

“Doesn’t matter, just keep running!”

Ryan shoved his way around the bamboo and bounded downhill. Gaining momentum, he leapt and hit the pillars of bamboo, swinging around, leaping off again. His vision pulsed with his throbbing heartbeat. The taste of copper was fresh in his mouth. Blood dripped from the dozens of scrapes and cuts that covered his face and forearms. He was intoxicated with his adrenaline.

He had never run so hard in his life, not since he escaped a hail of mortar fire in the jungles with Captain McNeil. He remembered the ground exploding around him; the trees collapsing; the fire and smoke that filled the air. The pain of the memory stung in Ryan’s gut, but this was worse. Infinitely worse.

The rising humidity smothered Ryan and Leon like wet cloth. Their legs bowed. They had been running for what seemed like hours, and their bodies were failing them. Ryan finally glanced over his shoulder and saw the T. Rex weaving downhill in a serpentine pattern.

Even from sixty feet away, the Tyrannosaurus looked large enough to swallow the sun. Ryan choked back a scream, and he stumbled. Leon ran into him and they both went rolling downhill, bouncing across the low rises and lumps of the earth.

Rocks scraped Ryan's sides and cracked against his joints. Bamboo shoots sliced through his clothes. He grabbed for purchase, clawed through the soft soil, and got kicked in the head by Leon's flailing boot. The lights switched off in Ryan's head.

When Ryan opened his eyes a few seconds later, he was airborne. He screamed and caught a thick column of bamboo to the gut, stopping his flight. He slid down the length of bamboo and dropped into a ditch filled with ferns. Pain flooded his body.

Ryan groaned and pushed himself upright. He looked uphill and saw Leon's face twisted in a scream, rushing towards him. Leon crashed into Ryan, and they slammed into the ditch. Coughing and groaning, they pulled themselves back up into a sitting position.

Further uphill, the T. rex was working its way around a final switchback towards them. It walked slowly, sniffing the air. Its muscular body was covered in deep green leather, with the black ringlets of a leopard covering its flank. A shaggy coat of iridescent green feathers covered the behemoth's back, wrapped around its throat in a mane, and created a sharp crest on the back of its skull. The huge head craned back and forth, its dark eyes scanning the forest floor.

Leon shivered violently behind Ryan and moaned. Ryan clasped his hand over Leon's mouth and pulled him back beneath the ferns.

The footsteps faltered. A baritone growl trembled through the earth as if a thousand bass strings were being plucked at once. Leon seized up in Ryan's grasp. Their faces were close together; Ryan could see Leon's huge eyes tearing up.

The look in Leon's eyes was the same as Ryan's when he had gone on his first mission with Vulture Squad. A thousand yard stare; he was in shell shock. His mind was

undoubtedly mute, a hollow skull full of screaming, overwhelming fear. Ryan tried to whisper a reassuring “Shhh,” but it came out like a spastic hiss. His jaw was locked shut.

The jungle was silent. The T. rex steadily walked along the base of the hill. In the distance, the mother T. rex growled like approaching thunderclouds. Chirps poked the open air. Ryan thought the father T. rex might return to its nest, but then a wide three-toed foot gripped the edge of the ditch.

Ryan glanced sideways and saw scaled talons, like those of an ostrich, inches away from his head. He looked up through the gaps in the ferns and saw the pale underside of the T. Rex’s huge head. It twitched in the direction of snapping branches. The eyes were bright and intelligent; very birdlike. The veins that were threaded through its neck pulsed as it inhaled. A thick strand of saliva dangled from its jaws and snapped off, smacking the ferns heavily above Ryan and Leon.

Leon seized violently. Ryan struggled to keep him still. The T. rex lowered its head and barked like an artillery gun. The sound was so forceful that it physically struck them both. The T. rex snorted heavily and swung its head back and forth. It barked again, short and brisk. It was then that Ryan realized what was happening; the T. Rex had lost them, so it was trying to scare them out of hiding.

They could remain hidden and wait the predator out, but how long would that take? The need to run was too great; Ryan was having trouble staying still in the ditch. His adrenaline urged him to flee.

Ryan could hear the river gurgling beneath the dinosaur’s barks and grunts. He was sure that he was hearing it and not another dinosaur; he wouldn’t make that mistake twice. Gauging the river’s distance was impossible, but he knew that if he could find it, they could get away.

It was a dangerous gambit; either hide and wait out the T. rex or make a run for it. For all Ryan knew, the river could be a mile away. However, the T. rex could find

them any second now. He whispered the plan to Leon; on the count of three, they would sprint for the river.

The T. rex took another step forward. Ryan stared at the smooth underbelly between the behemoth's legs. He held his fingers in front of Leon's face and whispered the words to himself.

One...

Two...

Ryan couldn't will himself to lower the third finger. The tension was coiling his muscles so tight that he thought they might burst. His hand trembled from the surging adrenaline. The air in his lungs felt like helium that would make him float away. He knew the T. Rex could outpace them. They had to move *now*.

Get up, Ryan! Go, you dumb bastard, go! Go!

Three!

Ryan and Leon scrambled out of the ditch between the T. rex's tree trunk legs and ran beneath its thick, swinging tail. The T. rex turned, and its tail smashed through the bamboo like they were brittle sticks. Ryan and Leon ducked from the raining splinters. They pumped their arms and kicked through the foliage that grew at the edge of the bamboo forest, sprinting towards the river. Ryan felt a burst of hope; they were going to make it!

The T. rex roared with seismic force as it barreled after them through the forest. The dense expanse of bamboo gave way to an open forest floor, and the behemoth was no longer inhibited amongst the sparse banyan trees. Ryan glanced over his shoulder and saw the Rex closing the distance with ease. In a matter of steps, it would have them in its jaws.

Ryan looked ahead and saw the end of the forest floor a few meters beyond a stand of trees. He planted his heel in the ground and staggered to a stop at the edge of a sun-bathed cliff face.

Leon stumbled beside him and looked down. The river rushed nearly sixty feet below. The opposite river bank was a waning moon of white sand surrounded by mangroves.

“We have to jump!” Ryan shouted.

Leon hesitated. They heard the ferocious howl of the Tyrannosaurus and turned to see it smash through the trees at the end of the forest, its jaws spread wide, teeth glinting in the sunlight.

Leon yelped and leapt off the cliff. Ryan dove after him and screamed as gravity wrenched him down. He caught a glimpse of the sky as he fell; scorched burgundy and charcoal clouds, with an intense yellow sun climbing above the mountains.

It was then that Ryan saw the Tyrannosaurus falling in after them.

Ryan screamed and knifed into the icy water with a frothy splash. He plummeted like a stone and slowly bobbed to the surface. Ryan broke through the muffled silence of the water and heard the sharp scream of the T. rex. A shadow fell over the river and the T. rex crashed in with the force of a falling boulder. The river surged and Ryan was dragged underwater towards the thrashing behemoth.

The current pulled Ryan into a whirlpool around the T. rex’s swinging skull. Ryan kicked, and the T. rex caught him with electric eyes. It snapped at him, cracking its jaws shut just as Ryan was dragged beneath the waves. The world turned muffled and dark. Ryan’s eyes opened to see the T. rex’s miniscule slashing forearms.

The tyrannosaur’s head burst beneath the waves and its jaws slammed shut a foot away from Ryan. Bubbles jetted from between its teeth. The force rolled Ryan

backwards and he caught a glimpse of Leon sinking beneath the tyrannosaur's kicking legs.

Leon wasn't moving.

Ryan kicked to the surface and gasped for air. The mask suffocated him; he dragged it down to his throat. With his lungs refilled to the brim, he dove back down and swam towards Leon. The T. rex snapped at his feet, and he was pushed further down. He spun in the water and propelled himself to the bottom. The T. rex's kicking created powerful waves that pushed Leon against the river's muddy floor. Ryan ducked the slashing talons and swam to Leon.

A wave kicked by the T. rex shoved Ryan into Leon's immobile frame. Ryan wrapped his arms around Leon's torso and pulled him towards the shore.

Ryan yearned for air like morphine. His lungs were withered, and his legs were leaden. Leon was dead weight; his jaw was slack. Ryan's eyes burned, and the cold burrowed into his bones. Gravity pulled him down, but he kicked and screamed his last breath in desperation. He pulled Leon towards the rippling surface of the river, where his last bubbles of oxygen had escaped to. His vision dimmed, and his ears were ringing. He could feel his consciousness slipping away.

Ryan's feet found the sloping river bank, and he broke through the water's surface. He gasped like a vacuum, pulling warm air into his lungs. His legs bowed painfully, drained of blood and energy, and he dragged Leon by his arms towards the powder-white shore. Leon didn't stir.

Ryan looked over his shoulder and saw the T. Rex had reclaimed its bearings. It slid through the water like an enormous crocodile; water glittered on its feathers like crystal beads.

"Oh, of course it can swim!" Ryan screamed.

“Hey, over here!”

Ryan turned at the sound of a Russian accent. A frail figure stood on the shoreline. The man was little more than pale skin stretched over a skeleton, draped in tattered khaki clothing. His hair was frizzled straw. Bloodshot eyes bulged from behind his spider-webbed spectacles. He ran across the shore and shouted, “Come on, follow me!”

A meteor could destroy the earth and Ryan wouldn’t have been surprised. The starved young Russian waded in and helped Ryan drag Leon onto the shore. Ryan collapsed, crawled over to Leon, and continued pulling him. Ryan’s limbs were useless. His breath came out in ragged gasps. He felt like he was going to faint.

Ryan and the Russian pulled Leon over to the mangrove forest and dragged him beneath the shade of the canopy. When Ryan turned, he saw the T. Rex walking out of the river, the muffled footsteps pounding against the sand. The T. Rex shook its mane dry and howled mournfully. The call was returned on the opposite bank. The mother tyrannosaurus stared down upon the father tyrannosaurus from the cliff face with her chicks.

The Russian paused to watch. He pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose.

“That’s the mother T. Rex across the river,” the Russian said. “T. Rex’s mate for life, like penguins, with the mother raising the chicks and the father hunting for the family. Without the father present, the mother will have to bring their chicks along to hunt. The father is going to do everything in his power to get back to his territory and return to his family. We should be safe...for now.”

The man licked his crusted lips and looked at Ryan.

“Is this a bad time?” the man asked.

Ryan was performing CPR on Leon, pumping his sternum with mounting desperation. Ryan paused, stooped over to listen to Leon's breathing, frowned, and continued his compressions. "Come on, Leon, wake up," he growled. "You've gotta wake up."

Ryan paused to listen to Leon's breathing again. He scowled and pumped Leon's chest three more times. "Wake up, you fucking kid," he hissed. "You need to go home. Just wake up, it's all you gotta do."

The Russian watched in silence. The Tyrannosaurs howled to one another from across the opposite river banks.

"Wake up, goddammit!" Ryan shouted, and he pounded Leon's chest. "Wake up, Leon! Wake up!"

Leon spasmed and puked. He turned on his side and curled into a ball, gagging brine and bile. Ryan patted him on the back.

"That's it, buddy, let it all out. Just get it out of your system. You'll be okay, just breathe. Just breathe."

Leon opened his eyes. The world was fuzzy. He focused on Ryan's face and winced at the gruesome sight. "What happened?" Leon rasped. "What happened to you?"

Ryan squinted, confused, but then he felt the cool air on his face and he tugged his mask back in place. He cleared his throat and squeezed Leon's shoulder.

"We made it," Ryan said. "We're alive."

The Russian cleared his throat. Ryan and Leon stared at him. There was an awkward silence in the air. Ryan glanced at the man's forearms. There were black welts along his veins. Ryan instinctively itched the veins of his own arm.

“Right, well...” the man said. “I suppose we can hide in my lab. We’ll be safe from the father T. Rex and the deinonychus flocks there. We should get moving.”

The man stood and turned to leave. Ryan and Leon remained on the ground. The man turned and grumbled, “Well, what are you waiting for? We have important matters to discuss.”

“We have to find the rest of our squad,” Ryan said. “We can’t just leave them back there...”

“It won’t matter where you find each other if you’re all dead,” The Russian said, coughing. “Now hurry up and follow me. We’ve got work to do.”

Ryan and Leon looked at each other, then back at the two Tyrannosaurs howling from the shore. They quickly climbed to their feet and followed the Russian man into the depths of the mangrove swamp, the roar of the Tyrannosaurs echoing behind them.