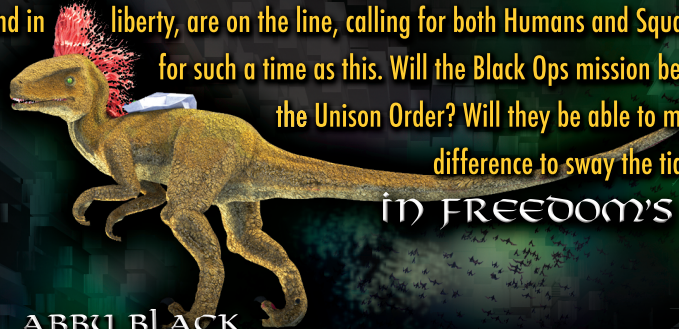


the 2ND installment of
THE ANTEdilUVIANS' STORY...

THE UNISON ORDER is gaining traction. An elite Black Ops team is sent on a clandestine operation to capture the UO President Lois Cornette and her henchmen before the peoples' independence is lost. More than just dinosaurian and human lives hang in the balance. The very tenets of living unchained, and in liberty, are on the line, calling for both Humans and Squama to step up for such a time as this. Will the Black Ops mission be able to stop the Unison Order? Will they be able to make a difference to sway the tide of war in FREEDOM'S FAVOR?



ABBY BLACK

Reading has always been a strong foundation in Abby Black's life. At the age of eight, after not being able to find the types of courageous books she enjoys, she took it upon herself to fill that gap. Penning her first unpublished full-length novel stoked a creative fire inside of her to develop adventures, including characters and narratives that capture and challenge the current state of the culture around her; characters who have honor and compassion, and who rise above their circumstances. In her teens, Abby broadened her interests in technology. She devoted her energies in learning video, digital art, and live-event production. Now, as a young adult, Abby is just as intentional with her time, choosing to invest in people, stories, animation, and other creative endeavors with Kingdom values and a moral compass.

"The Antediluvians" series is a thought-provoking, science-fiction-meets-action story, purposed to challenge her generation to go behind the surface of the culture to be a stalwart and effective Godly influence. Also, watch for two new and exciting forthcoming projects: A sci-fi historical fiction saga set in the Civil War era; and a line of merchandise and wearables that speak for life, liberty, and a gratitude to our military and First Responders. For more: www.abbyblack.com.

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THE ANTEdilUVIANS' 2ND MULTIPLE TARGETS
ABBY BLACK



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the
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2

MULTIPLE TARGETS



BY
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THE ANTEDILUVIANS 2

MULTIPLE TARGETS

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And thanks to all of you for reading my books, sowing into my life, and being a part of my journey. Much love to you!

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A red-tailed hawk looked up in wonder from its perch at the crest of the dead tree. The shout echoing in the distance was a symphony of many dialects, some of which the aging hawk had never before heard.

The hawk repositioned to a higher perch for better vision. Several miles away, a dense cloud of flying avians approached west to east. Nearby, a multitude of fellow comrades were lifting from the tree canopies to join the flock. The red-tailed hawk shuffled indecisively, unsure of the kerfuffle.

“We fly! We fly to the sea!”

“Come! Come! We must help! Come! Come with us!”

“Yes! My beak and talons are yours!”

“I’ll help! I’m coming!”

The hawk bounced on its heels a few times before leaping, wide wings sweeping. It flew closer to the cloud, within shouting distance.

“Ho! What is happening?”

A great beast, unlike anything the hawk had seen before, separated from the swarm. “Our leader is allied with the humans. She has requested that we help strike the head! The snake lies in the ocean ahead. We are to gather up everyone willing to fly.”

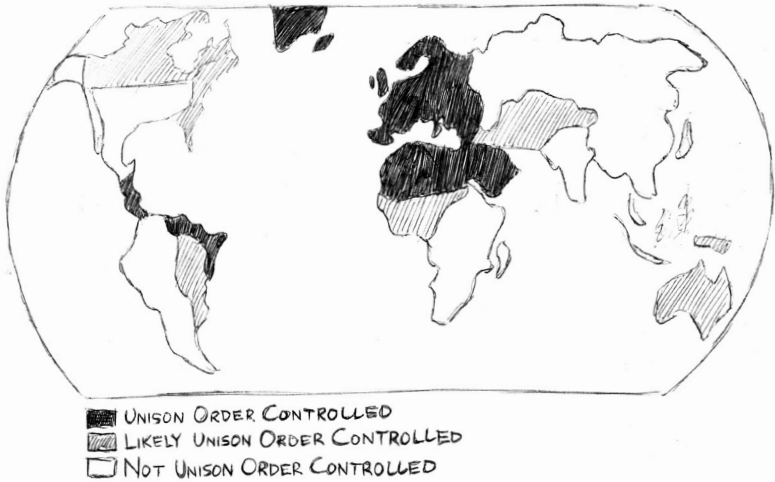
“As the winds are strong, I will help! Even though I think snakes are not what threatens the flightless two-legs.”

The massive creature beat its wings victoriously. “Yes! Yes!”

With a mighty war cry, the hawk joined its brethren in the

ABBY BLACK

cloud, and lent its voice to the summoning cry.



A RECENT HISTORY OF THE MODERN WORLD

In the year 2028, the United Nations Security Council unexpectedly lost their French delegate, Adrien Dubois, by cardiac arrest. Much-beloved by his people, his funeral was heavily attended by tens of thousands, while millions more watched online.

In the power vacuum, political factions fought with paper currencies and lofty promises. In the end, a dark horse woman with a message of hope won the race.

“It will be difficult for me to proceed in my predecessor’s shoes,” Dubois’ elected successor, Lois Cornette, declared in her victory speech. “But in my love for my beautiful country of France and her people, I will work to make this world a better

place; a transformed world that our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be proud to inherit. Together, we will realize a utopia of peace and prosperity for all.”

True to her promise, Lois Cornette dove into the task. The mission of rebuilding the collapsed European Union into the new Order was funded by visionary backers, men and women of great influence and global resources. Very early, they had leveraged financial opportunities from the collapses of nations and their global industries. Consequently, Delegate Cornette quickly became the most powerful U.N. Security Council member that history had ever seen. She was beloved by her own, and feared and despised by her opponents.

Using her impressive wealth and influence, she and the Council brokered immense bail-outs and bail-ins to the bankrupt European cities and nations. Seeing wealth in her shadow, the “Who’s Who” flowed to her side. The people valiantly lobbied that their Robin Hood be made the permanent President. With apparent reluctance, she acquiesced.

Strengthened by populous support, the new President went before the Security Council. “Our security will be ensured utilizing the most innovative and state-of-the-art tech created by V.A.U.L.T.,” Cornette said. “Our strength and unity will revolutionize the art of peace as we know it.”

Vehicular Aviation Utilization and Logistics Technology lived up to its leader’s promise. With an iron hand, V.A.U.L.T. cleaned up the local rampant corruption of U.N. security forces and local city-state governments with incredible expediency. On January 1, 2029, great fanfare and spontaneous celebrations burst in the streets, alongside massive spiritual ceremonies in ancient cathedrals and mosques. The U.N. assembly, with U.N. Order #B071216, formed a new nation from the European and most African nations. It was called the United Nations Unison

Republic.

Government officials and media talent, who dissented with the “Unison Order,” found themselves the unfortunate victims of strange and numerous acts of God. “Even gods, if they existed, were surely backing the United Nations Unison Republic.” With the new peace and prosperity, few bothered to consider hows and whys of the events.

In early March, 2031, the North and South American nations folded under their debt burdens. In a generous move, their debts were housed under the UN-backed IMF. Banks negotiated bail-outs with the failed nations. The defeated nations agreed to fall under the UNUR so long as they retained their current government hierarchy and borders. This arrangement assured their citizens that “nothing had changed.”

The United States’ Secretary of State met surreptitiously with UNUR President Cornette in a quiet French town in the remote countryside. It was supposed to be a closed door meeting, strictly off-the-record. Unbeknownst to the Secretary, Lois televised the meeting live.

She said, “The world has been led too long by big governmental and corporate leaders making closed-door deals to our detriment. I envision an earth where her people are united in peace. All six continents holding hands and looking forward, united under a single government.”

Lois Cornette was now the people’s hero. Mainline Christian denominations and their leadership praised the UNUR and the “Angel of God” for her Christlike compassion and humanity. Meanwhile, the exposed Secretary resigned, and a strong man, Frederick Gluten, replaced him.

Dissensions grew within the between-the-mountains

U.S. states who refused to fall in line. “Cornette’s just too good to be true.” The nation divided. Media broadcasts displayed their closed-minded protests and sign-waving with calls for secession or a constitutional convention of states.

Subsequently, the integrations of Canada and the South American nations into the new Republic stalled. Seizing the moment, previously deposed leaders scrambled to regain their lost power and control.

To ensure oversight, the Security Council moved to integrate V.A.U.L.T. into the IMF, the Federal Reserves, and the world economies. V.A.U.L.T. would become the literal ACME. The backing Cornette and her supporters provided the movement made V.A.U.L.T. massively successful, employing millions of people, distributing gadgets that ranged from elite military counterintelligence equipment to the most advanced household devices. Once again, she was the people’s hero for saving the world’s workers.

Rumors of wars spread from the Middle East into European and African countries. Hope eroded into suspicion and fear in the rest of the UNUR.

In the year 2038, the United Nations Unison Republic convened a summit of the Republic nations. The President was told that while her progressive vision was fantastic, it was unlikely to gain any footing. “It is no longer practical,” they said, “We are sorry, President Lois Cornette, but your full vision is unachievable at this time.”

Devastated, Lois Cornette removed herself from the public eye, becoming as close to invisible as a person in her prominent position would allow. The U.S.A. Secretary of State and President Lois Cornette were seen quietly convening many times. Rumors of a clandestine romance and conspiracy

theories escalated in mainstream media. Political sides were taken and severed.

In the year 2039, there was a series of terrible, disastrous events:

January 1st. England's Parliament was targeted by a devastating prototype weapon during an unusual visit by the Queen. Unlike the majority of Parliament, the Queen herself survived the initial blast, but died shortly thereafter, ending her long-lived reign. The Queen's great-grandchild took the throne in her place. Representatives from all over the earth travelled to give condolences. President Lois Cornette was the most sympathetic, freely giving funds for the ailing country. Her acts of friendship gained the trust of the new rulers and Parliament.

March 11th. The United States of America's Secretary of State was on his way home, flying cross-country in his private jet. With his daughter's 13th birthday coming up, it was known that he wished to be home to celebrate. During the trip, the Secretary's jet dropped from radar. Attempts to contact it were futile. The very day of his daughter's birthday, the remains of the jet was found in the middle of a forest. A forensic report said that the plane exploded on impact, incinerating all aboard. The "black box" was apparently destroyed. Media personalities solicitously broadcasted the devastating news, lamenting the great loss to the President and the Secretary's family.

June 29th. Paris, France was struck by a small squadron of aircraft unlike anything seen before. Hundreds of tourists and native French were killed in the attack, while thousands more were injured. Reports gathered from the surviving witnesses described two different types of aircraft; The first was sleek and jet-like, the other a far smaller drone helicopter with twin outboard primary rotors. The aircrafts had approached too low to detect. There had been no warning. With the rising number

of casualties came outcry against zealous religious sects.

The world waited for the next strike to come. Security worldwide was tightened. As the end of the year approached, people slowly began to relax. It was easy to want to believe that the first attack in France was also the final attack.

However, on Christmas Eve, the world received a series of new attacks. Targeting major world leader residences worldwide, the Buckingham Palace, The White House, and the Imperial Palace were included in the coordinated attacks. Few people and buildings survived. However, the new King and Queen of England were among the living.

The world reeled. No terrorist cell stepped forward to claim responsibility. V.A.U.L.T.'s UNUR keepers of peace were missing. V.A.U.L.T. military warehouses were found empty, and the production lines sabotaged or cannibalized.

December 30th. President Lois Cornette, the VA.U.L.T. Security General, and her directorates, were not to be found in the aftermath. New York officials found the President's New York residence torched and the remains of an unidentifiable body. Families reported loved ones inexplicably departing in unmarked vans. Media and the remains of the governmental leaderships demanded audiences with UNUR headquarters.

A propaganda statement surfaced in Lois Cornette's name, declaring the formation of the Unison Order. "I will create a planet worthwhile for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren! With your help, we will wipe out all evil, all corruption, and all pettiness from the Earth and replace them with equality, with wealth, with truth and justice! I envision a world where our descendants will be able to walk the streets alone without fear, where wars are but tales in history books, where countries can collaborate together without suspicion,

and we can journey to the stars as one people!”

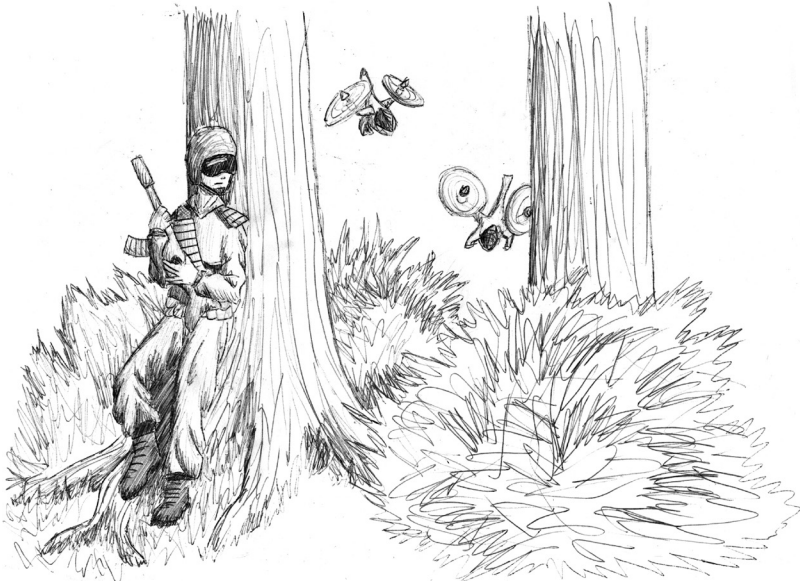
January 1, 2040. The United Nations Unison Republic dissolved into disruption as countries of the earth took sides. Those that joined new Unison Order were gifted with V.A.U.L.T resources to rebuild.

The non-complying countries shifted towards war. The Unison Order preemptively struck without warning. Nations were attacked from the oceans and seas. On the United States mainland, drones came in from both coasts like a swarm of locusts, darkening the skies in an immense show of force. Citizens fled in terror to newly formed refugee camps further inland.

In the year 2041, with worldwide commerce disrupted, the economy floundered. There seemed to be no hope to be had when the elective candidates campaigned to manage the defaulted nation, but the citizens were awestruck when the new faces of government learned from history and restored principles from the early 1900s. National spending was reduced by 80%, income tax was abolished to, hopefully, never return, and a sales tax capped to the current value of US currency was implemented in its place.

Even the war on the horizon could not keep hope from surging. Inspired by opportunity, nimble start-ups employed millions, organizing the restoration of razed cities and distribution of resources. Technological geniuses young and old were swept into the development of new markets. Mere months after having taken office, the government offered military contests to anyone who could design and build defensive and tactical weaponry against the Unison Order. Although the contest monetary awards were meagre, companies leapt at the opportunity for prestige and honor.

The following year, an R&D scientist hurtled herself into a portal.



PROLOGUE

Punctuated dirt plumes formed around her as Robin somersaulted behind the nearest tree. Bullets lodged in the trunk behind her head, shards of bark and wood splaying, while she caught her breath. Dirt clods settled around her, reminiscent of falling snow, while the dust betrayed the course of the sun's rays through the canopy. Unshed tears blurred her vision, and she worked her hand beneath her visor to wipe her eyes clear.

With her helmet now askew from its rightful position, she quickly corrected. Her visor's built-in HUD, alit with a collection of sensor readings, informed her of the UO-GD drones closing in. They would surround her if she didn't move *now*.

She lunged, the grass peeling away beneath the tread of her boots. Unprepared for the slide, her knees buckled into a stumble. She hurriedly righted herself, heart pummeling her chest at the mistake. Distance lost, the drones got a clear sight of her, and her HUD flashed red. Diving behind a boulder saved her life.

She could hear the steady buzz of the drones pursuing her as she dashed from tree to tree. Rounds streaked past. She leapt off the peak of a hill, hoping that the slope would buy her a few precious seconds. Before she could descend, one of the bullets grazed her right bicep, leaving a bloody red slash across her combat suit. A gritty gasp escaped between clenched teeth as the wound seared at her nerves, pleading for care.

Setting her jaw and crouching down low, she located better cover. Scanning her HUD's readout, she bent around her cover's trunk and opened fire.

Her first shot missed, but the rest of her rounds met their respective targets. Each of the sleek dark green drones spiraled to the ground, smoke and electricity arcing visibly from their fuselages. She grunted in satisfaction as she reloaded her sub-automatic, slipping the spent magazine into a pocket.

Her HUD confirmed she was safe for the moment. With an exhalation, she granted herself the luxury of leaning against the rough bark of her shelter. She inspected her wound, pleased to find that it was minor and would hardly need stitching, although the torn edges of her uniform were already red with saturation.

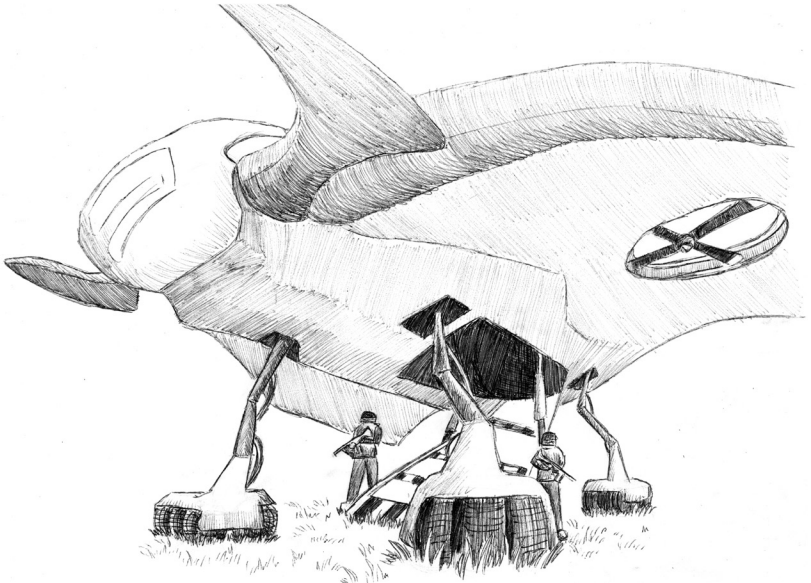
“Eagle Eyes to Roost. Eagle Eyes to Roost. Fall back to rendezvous position. Repeat, fall back to rendezvous position. Affirm. Over.”

“Lima Charlie. Tapper affirms. Already at position. Over and out.”

“Lima Charlie. Crow affirms. Two klicks north– Eat lead, you vapid nudniks! Coming in hot. Over and out.”

“Lima Charlie. Arcee affirms. Half klik south of rendezvous position.” She paused, taking a breath. “Natter’s gone angel. Over and out.”

She rose to her feet and sprinted, in bursts, the 500 meters to the rendezvous point. At the peak of a hill was a tiny clearing surrounded by trees. In the center of the clearing was a sleek Manta Transport, its propellers and turbines already activated. Armed-to-the-teeth guards dressed in dark camouflage surrounded the aircraft. They only glanced at her as a ramp was lowered from the Manta Transport’s underbelly. She ascended.



“Good to see you aboard, boys,” she panted as she sat herself in one of the plastic chairs mounted to the hull. There was a first-aid kit attached to the wall. She grabbed it and began treating her wound.

“You look like the forest ran you over,” said a teammate, glancing up from his laptop.

“And *you* look as fresh as the day you were born, fobbit,” Robin shot back, aware of the grime and sweat gluing her uniform to her body. Her grazed wound was beginning to throb. The adrenaline was fading. As she applied the antiseptic spray, Robin clenched her jaw against reaction. It took several moments before the sensation of butterfly knives, kneading her flesh, faded away. “Have fun playing with code while the rest of us are hauling our tails?”

A short Asian man looked to Robin. “Connors,” Commander Rick Lennox said. “What happened to Launch?”

She winced, recalling when her partner had fallen. She could not help thinking it was her fault. “The drones got him. But we did complete our objectives, sir.”

She reached into her vest’s chest pocket and pulled out a set of dog tags. Operatives in the field had been microchipped since the ‘30s, but it was tradition to wear dog tags around the neck. The set in her hand she had pulled off her friend’s neck after the light had gone from his eyes. It was all she had time to snatch.

She read the inscribed indentions in the rectangular metal plates; *Launch, Jason C., 110-17-2014, O NEG, Christian*. With a small sigh, she gingerly handed them to her commander.

Lennox took the tags solemnly and placed them in his

own vest with a quiet *clink*. “Launch was a good man. Once we get back to camp, I’ll write his family. You may add your own words to the message, if you wish. Takin, have you managed to scramble enemy transmissions?”

“Perfectly,” Nelson “Tapper” Takin replied, fingers flying across the laptop he carried everywhere. “The firewalls protecting their drones are outstanding, but nothing I can’t hack to oblivion. They won’t be retrieving their drones anytime soon, Commander.”

“Good,” Lennox said.

A tall, blond man sprinted up the ramp, winded but unharmed. “Commander,” he said, “more drones are approaching from the east. We must absquatulate.” The last part was garbled before his true voice, albeit muffled, came through, signifying that the vocalizer in his helmet needed repairs.

Lennox jumped to his feet and dashed to the cockpit door. “Get this pup up and out!” he yelled to the pilots. “Drones coming in hot!”

Robin frowned. “Tapper, you said you’d gotten them all!”

The hacker bent over his laptop, frantically typing anew. “I thought I had. I’ll confuse their processors long enough for us to get out of their range.”

Robin wanted to press, but he was already focusing, and her words would be unheard.

“Prepare for flight,” the pilot said, hands immediately flying to trigger controls. “Bring propellor power to 100 percent,” he said to his copilot.

Robin hurriedly fastened the straps around her torso as the guards from outside ran up the ramp and buckled in. As the last man boarded, the ramp lifted up and sealed into place. At the same time, the muffled din of the rotors rose in volume, vibrating through the hull against Robin's back. Seconds later, the Manta Transport shifted as its skids left the ground. It briefly rocked until the twin rotors fully leveled and took the stabilized craft into the sky.

Replacing the first-aid kit, Robin was able to look out of one of the small windows in the fuselage at the rapidly falling away forest. The tops of the trees were flattened by the air forced down from the rotors, loose leaves having no chance against the gale. The aircraft quickly gained speed, pushing its occupants into their seats, and soon the ground was lost to her sight.

Robin rested her head against the wall and exhaled. Somewhere down there laid her fallen partner, left to carrion. She deeply regretted not carrying his body back to the aircraft, but, if she had tried, the team'd be down two members. It would be recovered later.

Suddenly, the aircraft veered to the port side, with protest from the engines. Hearing shouts from the cockpit, Robin peered out her window. A trio of large drones flashed by in a blur of black and yellow. Robin gritted her teeth; those drones weren't like the ones she and Natter had encountered.

No, those were UO-SDs; one of the Unison Order's speciality drones. Instead of the smaller, helicopter-styled assassin drones, the UO-SDs were six feet from nose to tail, with a nearly 10 foot wingspan. On the underside of the wings were two twin sets of compact machine guns, and hidden inside the underbelly was a lethal batch of heat-seeking missiles.

The pilots sent the Manta Transport through a series of

evasive maneuvers that seemed impossible for a craft of such design. For a moment, the ceiling became the floor, but the centrifugal force kept everything in place. Robin restrained from looking out the window, not wishing to see the ground in any other place but down. At some point, her hands had grasped the sides of her seat, but she wasn't inclined to release her white-knuckled clutch.

She fingered her weapon, its strap still slung around her neck. She didn't want to be penned in a flying metal coffin, helpless like this! If there was a way to safely dangle from the plane and return fire, she would.

The triple-barreled shock rifles pounded, vibrations echoing through the floor, and a moment later the drones aileron-rolled asunder. The Manta Transport, belying its unassuming and cumbersome appearance, took pursuit.

Robin closed her eyes, shoving away her avinosis as the aircraft abruptly and deeply plunged. Normally, she enjoyed the feeling of leaving her stomach behind, but this? It felt like her stomach had escaped to outer space. It was distinctly unnerving.

She braved a peek out the window just in time to see one of the drones flying parallel to the Manta Transport become shredded. It fell into a death spiral toward the ground with smoke billowing behind it in a black banner. The other two flew into sight, attacking the plane from the starboard side. Robin could hear the thunks of their ammunition hitting the hull, coming dangerously close to striking the fuel tank.

The onboard computer focused the shock cannons on the drones. The UO-SDs veered opposite ways. One avoided harm and found the Manta's blind spot while the other was shredded and plummeted to join the first.

The remaining drone was already firing again. Robin stifled a gasp as her stomach, just returning, plunged to the soles of her boots. The Manta Transport flew upward at an astonishing speed, with rotors pounding. Although she couldn't see the last drone, Robin still felt the juddering of the automated targeting system.

Finally, the shock cannons silenced, and the Manta Transport evened out. "*This is Captain Rex,*" came the pilot's voice over the speakers. "*Drones destroyed. Returning to previous course. ETA's nearly half an hour later than previously estimated. We can relax a bit now.*"

There was no telling what else the Unison Order might throw at them. Robin couldn't relax until they were safe at the COP base.

"Is everyone all right?" Lennox asked. "Crow, are you injured?"

Maurice Williams, call-sign Crow, shook his head as he checked his magazine cartridge. "I'm quintessentially plum." He grabbed a cartridge box from a wall compartment nearby and began reloading the magazine.

"A-OK, Commander," Takin said, easing his grip on his laptop.

"I'll be fine," Robin managed.

Fortunately, the rest of the flight was uneventful. The pilots announced the final approach about five minutes before the Manta Transport landed. It was a very soft landing, barely felt. Robin unbuckled her harness and stood, stretching her muscles. Holding her rifle diagonally against her chest, muzzle pointed at the floor, she patiently waited for the ramp to lower.

Lennox trotted down first, followed by herself and Williams, and Takin took up the rear. They hurriedly crossed an overgrown parking lot, coming to a walk only when the camouflage nets were above their heads. Behind them, the Manta Transport departed for the hidden hanger.

“Team Alpha!” shouted the base’s commander. “Report in for immediate debriefing!”



Robin trudged into the women’s quarters with the day’s events weighing on her. The base commander hadn’t let anything go unsaid, and the loss of her mission partner was recounted in great detail. Robin hadn’t enjoyed the process at all, but felt a little more at peace in the knowledge that the recovery of Jason’s body was a priority.

Her mood wasn’t improved by her surroundings. Everywhere she looked in the temporary base screamed of a past she would much rather have continued living. The base was made out of an abandoned country school. The town had been bombed several years back, and whoever hadn’t been killed had evacuated and never returned.

The women’s quarters just so happened to be in the southern wing, where the third through eighth grade classes used to be held.

“Class, today we have a new student with us. Honey, why don’t you stand up and introduce yourself?”

“. . .Hi. I’m R-Robin Connors. I. . . I’m eleven years old. I just moved here. . .”

“That’s wonderful, Robin. From where did you move?”

“B-Barcelona.”

“That’s quite a ways from here. Do you like your new home?”

“I guess. . .”

“Well, you’ll settle in soon enough! For now, let’s open our textbook and begin on page. . .”

The children and teacher’s desks were long gone, replaced by cots and a series of faded, colored plastic storage cubbies. There was one other woman in the room, napping.

Shoving memories into the shadowy depths of her mind, Robin quietly strode over to a cubby. She pulled out a cleaning kit, then retreated to her cot to tend to her rifle and handgun. She worked in silence for a while, taking apart her weapons, studiously cleaning them. But, finally, a tear slid from her eye and down her cheek. Her hands stilled as her head bowed.

I’m so sorry, Jason, she thought. I could’ve done something. Should’ve done something.

It was of no use crying over spilt milk. She would see the coffin, draped with the sovereign flag of his country, before the departure, say a few words, and move on with her life struggling with survivor’s guilt.

She resumed the routine of cleaning her weapon, the tear evaporating on her cheek.



CHAPTER ONE

Nicole sat at her work desk, holding a framed photograph of a bipedal dinosaur drinking from a river. The sunlight filtering through lush tree canopies caused the *Intimidator* on Freedom's back to shine like polished silver.

Index finger tapping idly against the side of the frame, her gaze flicked to a single paper, lying on top of a nondescript envelope. She had received so many identical letters before that she could recite the text by heart. "*Miss Nicole Nike. . . consider the valuable assets over which you have jurisdiction. . . their assistance would be greatly appreciated should you consent. . .*"

Nicole thoughtfully rubbed her chin. *The Intimidator is short full capability only because the launchers and fuel canisters*

need reloading. But there is no reason to do so as Freedom is armipotent all by herself.

Not a moment later, she berated herself for even thinking such a thing. The dinosaurs *just* came from a war. Who was she to even consider asking them to participate in a war of a completely different species? The dinosaurs were no match for long-range missiles, UAVs, and heat-seeking projectiles. They'd die before they'd come within 50 miles of enemy lines.

An idea flooded her mind. She turned on her desktop computer. Opening up the file dedicated to dinosaurian images, she viewed a section titled "Pterosaurs." Only two types had survived after coming through the time portal: Quetzalcoatlus and Pterodactylus.

She opened the file on dinosaurian data. Each glance at the Quetzalcoatlus specs caused her to wince and look away. They were too big, as large as a school bus; but the Pterodactylus was more promising. They weren't much bigger than an iguana in length, she could work with this!

She grabbed a sketchbook and pencil, her mind's eye quickly taking form on the paper. First, she sketched a Pterodactylus in a static pose. As quickly as the graphite appeared, her mind went twice as fast. She drew a vest, thick and pocketed. Then, an ammunition belt. The firearm gave her some trouble, but she came up with a suitable adaptation. Once she had finished with the pterosaur, she drew a second image of a raptor. The ammo belt was fastened around the thighs with the gun altered, handholds, and a fairly normal trigger.

At long last, she sat back in her chair and relieved her back muscles. She flipped between the two pictures, studying them intently. They were hardly similar to the *Intimidator*. The new design was without a neural linking system, laser, or jet

engine, and the only weapon was a customized, fully-automatic rifle. It felt like a downgrade, but she had to consider covert aspects.

Nicole pushed back her chair as she rose to her feet. She hurried from her office, taking long steps along the halls. Interns and employees greeted her as they passed each other, and she gave them a nod in response.

“Where ya goin’, boss lady?”

Nicole glanced at the young woman at the reception desk in the lobby. Jasmine was barely out of her teens and had taken the job as extra pay for college. Her thick southern drawl punctuated her speech.

“Out to check on the dinosaurs,” Nicole replied, moving toward the board of key hooks that hung near the desk. She selected one for a jeep. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“Say ‘Hi’ to them for meh!” Jasmine cooed.

Nicole glanced down at the organized clutter on the desk, electronic pad sitting front and center. A half-drawn hadrosaur was on the screen, stenciled in blue lines. She looked back up at the receptionist and nodded. “If I get the chance.”

Jasmine grinned. “Thanks.”

Nicole bounced the keys in her hands as she walked out. As she descended the porch steps in a choppily bouncy gait, she waved in greeting to the guard on duty. He nodded back to her from his position in the guard hut, which was positioned on the edge of the parking lot with a direct line of sight to the driveway.

On the far side of the parking lot was a line of identical stock jeeps, all a solid shade of greenish grey with beige soft tops. She tapped the remote on the keys to see which she would be driving. One of them flashed its pale yellow headlights, the glass coverings still dustily opaque from its last few uses, and she could hear the clunk of the locks disengaging. The sound never failed to make her lips quirk; such an antique noise.

Using the roll bar, she swung herself into the driver's seat. She started the engine and carefully pulled out of the parking lot. The dirt path to the dinosaurs' territory was directly off of the paved access road to the building, cleverly hidden behind some large ferns. Once the vehicle passed the ferns, the way was unobstructed and direct.

Leaning back in the seat, she flexed her fingers over the steering wheel. She began composing a speech in her mind that she hoped was persuasive enough. By the time the path came to a dead end, she had revised her speech four times. She parked the jeep and slid out, hoping that Freedom would agree.

She consulted her compass for the right direction, twirling in a circle to pinpoint where she needed to begin walking.

"Freedom, I need your help," she muttered under her breath. "Freedom, I *need* your help. I need *your*— No, that's terrible. I need your *help*. Assistance? Reinforcements?" She shook her head.

She saw a series of large boulders up ahead, so she scaled a rock and stood straight once reaching the top. Beyond the ridge was the wide, indolent Branch River. Along one bank was an expansive clearing, lush with green blades of tall grasses. The puffy tops were shifting in the slight breeze, causing an effect like waves on water. The forest was doing its best to

encroach on the open space, saplings and shrubs speckling the area. However, with the number of enormous herbivores, it was unlikely that attempt would succeed. A portion of the dinosaurian population inhabited the clearing, enjoying the brightness of the day.

Nicole took a deep breath, then let it out as a loud hooting sound, similar to what the Corythosaurus used as a locator. It came from the back of her throat and through both her mouth and nose, cracking if she shifted her tongue or tensed. She had made it a habit to hoot whenever she approached, so the dinosaurs wouldn't be startled by an unannounced appearance. They did not care for the artificial rumbling of the jeeps, the general consensus being that the engines sounded like rabid Tyrannosaurs.

Heads rose to face her. Some of them made a greeting noise in return, others had fleeting interest and returned to whatever they had been previously doing. A few of them, namely the Pterodactylus, flew toward her and circled above. Their wings cast tiny gusts of air on her, ruffling her hair and clothing.

"Welcome, Nicole!" they squawked in dinosaur-ese. "We've missed you!"

"I've missed you, too," Nicole responded in kind, tucking some wayward strands of her hair behind an ear, then reverted to English. "How have you been?" She smiled warmly at a youngling, who was valiantly working to hover in front of her.

The largest, a black pterosaur called Assail, alighted on a branch above her head. "If you mean all of us as a whole," he said in guttural, raspy English, "then we are doing fine. Food is plentiful and water is only moments away."

“Glad to hear it. And yourself?”

“Thriving. What brings you here?”

“I need to speak to Freedom. Is she nearby?”

Assail rustled his wings and pointed with his beak toward the river. “Drinking. You can see her from here.”

Nicole squinted, scanning with her eyes around the shoreline. Finally, a flash of gleaming silver caught her attention. “Thank you, Assail. You’ve been most helpful.”

“You’re welcome,” Assail replied.

Scaling down the boulders was a simple act of jumping from ledge to ledge until the ground was within a safe distance. Loose pebbles and stones rattled down ahead of her, disappearing into the grass, where she imagined some bugs were experiencing an apocalyptic event. Before she was able to get all the way down, a Corythosaurus moved into her way.

Before she could ask it to shift, it said, “Use my back to get down.”

Nicole gingerly stepped onto its back, which was complicated. She crawled over the thin dorsal ridge and used the bump of a thigh as a step on her way down to the ground. She kept a hand on the Corythosaurus’ scaly hide until she stabilized.

“Thanks,” she called, waving over her shoulder as she walked on her way.

The Corythosaurus trumpeted in reply, a smile barely visible on its stiff snout.

Nicole picked her way through herds and packs, saying “Hello” at every turn. She was nudged, she was bumped, and once an overly enthusiastic Stygimoloch youngling gave her a fond pile-driver headbutt in the hip. Fortunately, none tried to engage her in conversation, and she was able to soon see the ochre Utahraptor delicately drinking from the river. The *Intimidator* gleamed in the sunlight, nary a mar on its surface.

As Nicole opened her mouth to shout a greeting, Freedom’s nostrils widened and her head snapped up. She sniffed the air a few more times before searching the area. Her emerald eyes landed on Nicole, who flinched instinctively as the Utahraptor ran forward.

“You’re back!” Freedom said, draping her head on Nicole’s shoulder in the dinosaurian version of a hug.

Nicole felt as if she would never get used to a toothy head the size of a huge watermelon so close to her face. But, she returned the hug with a pat, feeling the sinew and muscle rippling beneath the skin. A shiver of muted fear tingled down her spine, having something so *strong* so close. “Hello, Freedom.”

Freedom drew back, and Nicole’s “fight or flight” instinct calmed. She hoped that her scent hadn’t betrayed her. “I know that you’ve come here on business,” the Utahraptor said, cocking her head. “What’s the issue?”

This was it. “I won’t beat around the bush, Freedom. We need your help.”

“In your war?”

“Yes. Please, Freedom! If reinforcements don’t come, the Unison Order will overwhelm our forces.”

Freedom's eyes narrowed. "This is the second time you've come to me with such a request. The answer is the same. My kind is still recovering from the trauma of losing so many. We may *never* regain the numbers we once had."

"But—"

"Nicole, I've seen much more than I should've, despite my young age. You want us to go into a fight where we can be killed without ever seeing our foes." Freedom cast a look to the shallow waters, where some Utahraptor younglings played and splashed. "I have a family now, not only by blood, but everyone here is close to me."

"What happens if the Unison Order wins?" Nicole tried another tactic. "They'll invade and treat you like dumb animals, maybe even kill you all. Would you wish such a future on the youth?"



The Utahraptor looked down at the ground in rumination, then back up to meet Nicole's eyes. "And if we, the adults, the *parents*, die? They'll be left as orphans, not knowing how to hunt and live successfully. Then they'll die of starvation or foolish means they would've known how to avoid. No, Nicole, I cannot let my people die in *your* war."

Nicole was silent, gaze dancing between Freedom's alien eyes. The orbs, ebony slits in a sea of all shades of green, stared back in resolve, only the barest flickers of emotions hinted at in their depths. Not locating what she hoped for, Nicole bowed her head in submission, then turned on her heel and walked away.

"Nicole," Freedom called after her gently. When Nicole stopped mid stride to look over her shoulder, the dinosaur continued, "I . . . could gather the other sub-leaders. We'll have a meeting. I'll send you the answer tonight."

Nicole nodded. "I understand. Thank you."

The trek back to the jeep was a blur. Nicole was going on auto pilot as she drove back to the office building. She parked the jeep back in its spot, pocketed the keys, and trudged inside.

"How'd it go?" Jasmine asked.

Nicole hung the keys in their place. They jangled from rough treatment, rocking on the hook so much they almost slid right off. It was a few seconds before the keys declined into a quiet chime, then fell soundless completely.

Jasmine's hopeful grin fell. "Oh. That bad, huh?"

True to form, the television mounted on the waiting room wall decided to lend its two cents. "*Things are looking*

dismal as our troops on the front lines are forced to retreat sixty miles. . .”

Nicole narrowed her gaze at the screen, not appreciating the newscast’s timing in the slightest. Most of the seats were occupied by other employees or volunteers, their attention caught by the broadcast. Nicole read the scrolling text at the bottom of the screen and her heart fell. The reporter, although safe behind a desk, looked appropriately distraught.

“ . . .reassure that we will soon recover lost ground. Authorities predict the final encounter won’t be far in the future. . .”

Not wishing to view any more, Nicole turned and trod to the break room. She went directly to the snack drawer. Rifling through its contents, she picked a box of raisins, a caramel chocolate bar, and an organic orange soda. Closing the drawer, she turned and promptly collapsed onto the nearest couch.

She indulged in the food, forcing everything but the taste from her mind. She didn’t want to think about anything concerning the UO or Freedom’s resistance from helping.

I understand her concerns, Nicole mused as she nibbled on the candy bar. They just defeated an evil illegitimate king and his sycophants. It’s horribly presumptuous of me to even consider asking them to throw themselves into another war. It’s not fair to them.

Her snack was done far too quickly, and she glumly tossed her recycling and trash in the receptacles. A dim flash of light told her that the garbage had been properly flash incinerated into ashes.

She went to her office, knowing that she still had work

to do despite how much she wished to return to her apartment and retire for the day. She closed her office door after her, a clear sign that she didn't want to be disturbed. Seating herself in her favorite chair, she turned on her computer.

Work always succeeded in drowning out everything else in life. Thoughts of evil forces and dinosaurs were overridden by updates to be made to the website, juggling her other job at the R&D center, scheduling, and paying her bills. The latter she did by hand, not trusting the online account for the state bank since their last data breach. She worked for hours, the light coming in from outside her window slowly darkening.

Finally, a pop-up window appeared on the monitor, a calendar reminder that it was 10:00. Nicole closed the pop-up and checked the security monitors. Except for the second-shift engineers, most all of the employees and volunteers were gone, and Jasmine was headed toward her office door.

Nicole looked up at the knock. "Come in."

Jasmine peeked her head in. "It's closin' time, Miss Nike. If ya don't mind, Ah'll be goin' home now."

"Go on home, Jasmine," Nicole bid with a nod. Jasmine always made sure to be the first to arrive every day. The girl deserved leisure. "Rest well."

"Ya, too, Miss Nike," Jasmine said with a smile before leaving.

Reminded of the lateness of the day, Nicole turned to her computer to run some final checks. The surveillance system was up and running, and she noticed that Jasmine safely made it onto the road. She ensured that the day's Reserve feeds were uploaded onto the main database archives.

As there were too many carnivores, the animals would wipe out a forest's population of anything mammalian. The Reserve and the government had employed a donation drive, urging farmers and hobbyists to gift livestock to the previously extinct newcomers. The dinosaurians had caught on quickly to the concept of farming.

It was a win-win-win arrangement. The herbivorous dinosaurs weren't in fear of being turned upon, the carnivores were able to eat, and the humans enjoyed their regulatory compliance paperwork regarding how the livestock lived and the minute details of each processed animal.

She wasted no time approving each and every single rating. The faster it was done, the sooner she'll be through it.

Nicole glanced at the time before scanning what she'd completed over the day. On the upper right hand corner of her desk was a stack of envelopes that needed to be mailed. The website and the events calendar for the Reserve were up to date. She made a mental note to spend more time at her other job at the R&D company.

I suppose I'm finished for today, she thought, gathering her bags. She slung them over one shoulder and shut down her computer for the night. Before she left her office, she badged out, swiping her identification card across a wall sensor.

The building was not large. There was a large front room with a hallway at the back, and off that hall were a few offices, the server room, and the break lounge. The Reserve was not a tourist attraction, so a kiosk of brochures was like an afterthought in a corner of the waiting room. As Nicole walked, she made sure that everyone was indeed gone for the day, and engaged the security system after she locked the place.

Her car was plugged into a power post in the parking lot by the nondescript jeeps. It was an old model, from when vehicles were hybrids. She used the key fob to unlock her car from a distance, then unplugged it and wound the cord into its cubby hole. She dumped her bags into the front passenger seat, and started the car.

Fortunately, traffic was scarce. Before she reached her apartment building, she passed by the complex of her friends, Pete and Anita Berg. She gave it a glance before returning her attention to the road.

Nicole and Pete were the topmost scientists in her company. As she was a focus point in the historical expedition, some of her findings and samples were being discussed in prominent journals. While also an expedition member, Pete was publicly shunned. Not long after the return, however, another research company noticed him. The gang in Room 7 was sad to see him leave.

From the Berg apartment, it was less than five minutes to the underground parking deck for her apartment complex. The noise of the city faded into an echo, as if a soundtrack from a dream. She quickly found her assigned space, illuminated by yellow, almost orange, lighting. With her bags in tow, she set the locks and alarm before heading to the glass elevator.

As the elevator quickly ascended, she looked out over the expanding view of the city. The lights from the skyscrapers and the traffic on the roads shone through the evening's haze.

She walked down the hall to her drab and unassuming door. The only thing abnormal about it were the numerous locks. She went through the meticulous process of inserting the correct keys for each, then entered.

Immediately assaulted by a mass of golden fur and slobber, her dog enthusiastically greeted her, sniffing at her clothes and shoes. If he had been any less trained, he'd be barking and rearing up to plant his front feet on her shirt.

"Hey, Compeer!" Nicole said, trying not to trip over her dog on her way to the couch. "Did you miss me, boy?"

Ruff! Compeer barked softly, panting happily. His tail was a wagging blur as he danced on his paws.

"Are you hungry? Me, too. Have you been a good dog and made dinner for me? Huh?"

Compeer bounded into the kitchen and nosed open a cabinet door beneath the sink. In the cavity was a stack of dog food cans. He tilted his head so that he could wrap his mouth around one. By the time Nicole reached the can opener, he was waiting, the can in his mouth.

"Good boy!" Nicole praised, ignoring the saliva. She opened the can and dumped the contents into his food bowl. She wrinkled her nose at the brown glop. "How can you *eat* that? It's like the mystery meat at the high school cafeteria." She felt a little guilty as she thought of her rotisserie chicken in the fridge.

Compeer didn't care. As soon as the bowl was on the floor, he attacked it, wolfing down his food.

"You'll eat it, of course." She rolled her eyes and took a few quick steps to the refrigerator. "Now, what's for me? We've got Chinese take-out from last week, the chicken, an inch of milk, and a slice of apple pie. In the freezer? Banana ice cream! I know what I'm having, Compeer."

Nicole set up the TV tray table and put her dinner on it. Leaning back on the couch, she picked up the remote and flicked through the 100-plus channels, only to eventually switch inputs and watch a recorded movie.

“You’d think that humanity would graduate from arena spectacles,” she muttered to her dog, who had by then finished eating and had gone to his doggy bed. “So much for evolution, huh?”

The movie was about halfway over when something tapped at the window. Nicole jumped, almost choking on her ice cream. She rushed to the window. Pushing the curtains aside, Nicole shoved the pane of glass upward, revealing a Pterodactylus precariously holding onto the narrow exterior sill. Once the window was opened, it hefted itself onto the platform, clenching and flexing its wing-claws to loosen them.

“Hello,” Nicole said in dinosaur-ese. She tried not to get her hopes up, but it was hard. *Please, let her have said yes. Let her have said yes.*

“Hi,” the Pterodactylus replied, adjusting its balance. “Freedom sent me to you.”

“What’d she say?”

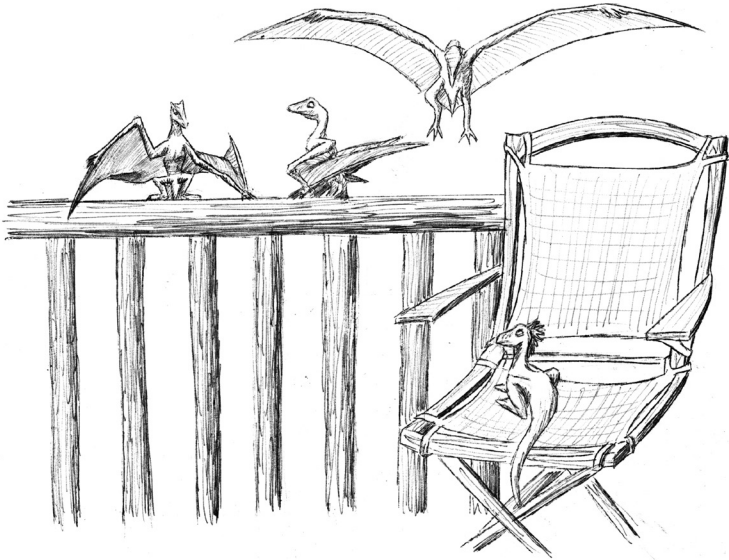
“That we have fought our war. You can fight yours. She won’t allow any of us to interfere until there is no other option.”

Nicole felt mildly depressed at the news, but maintained a neutral expression. “Very well. Thanks for telling me.”

The Pterodactylus squawked and flew off into the night, wing beats quickly fading off into silence. However, due to the city light’s reflection off the cloud cover, she was able to track

its silhouetted form for some time before it became too small to see.

With another sigh, Nicole slowly slid the window back into place, then closed the curtains. Compeer whined at her feet as Nicole trudged back to the couch. Her dessert had several bites left, but she didn't have the stomach for it anymore. She put it in a container and back in the freezer.



CHAPTER TWO

Menial task work was a boon at times and a chagrin at others. The practiced motions, once established, enabled the mind to wander. In Robin's case, hers trod roads of memories and daydreams. The most beaten paths were of her waking up in the morning without her first thought being *Are we under attack?* Then her childish dream job that was blissfully pedestrian, like a librarian. In between shifts she could select a novel from the high, long shelves of dark rose wood and descend into a beanbag chair in a quiet corner, and no one would disturb her until she either finished or her next shift began.

She reached for the next piece of her dismantled firearm. Realizing that there were none left, she switched gears, cleaning and reassembling.

Her mind wandered to her Mam and Papa. Mornings inundated with the aroma of delectables, as her Mam was a hobbyist baker who sold her wares to whomever was interested. Of fresh wood in the garage, sawdust particles hovering in the air as Papa worked on his next commissioned piece. Breath suddenly catching in her throat, she wondered if they had made it out before the town had been razed. There had been so many bodies left in the streets, so many still exposed where they had fallen, ravaged by animals and the elements.

Robin gazed at her assembled pistol. With all that she had seen, experienced. . . she wasn't the same person.

Rising from her cot, Robin holstered her weapon and checked the clock. It was almost time for dinner in the cafeteria. She remembered the way quite well. Left, straight, pass by the gym (which now had a tree growing in the court), left. She walked through the double doors of the cafeteria and was greeted by the redolence of reconstituted foodstuffs.

She strode to the counter and looked over the selection; MREs, as always. She chose one, then walked over to the table with her teammates. She sat down at the end of the bench, adjusting her stance until the flat surface became bearable.

"Evening, boys," she said, taking a fork and digging in. Supposedly, it was beef stew. The flavors blended together to create a flat, sharp tone beneath the heat of the dish, although the stronger elements, like the corn and meat, managed to perk slightly above the conglomeration.

"Conners." Lennox nodded.

As Robin took a bite, the sound of tapping registered in her ears. A glance to her right showed Takin with his ever-present laptop, typing away with his own MRE barely touched

and cooling rapidly. Robin admired his diligence, but she thought that the man needed to take a break every so often. One did not live by code alone.

“Find anything?” she asked him.

Takin cast a sidelong glance, one that told her that he heard her but most of his attention was focused elsewhere. “The French sent HQ the files on Lois Cornette,” he said. “HQ forwarded them to me in the hopes I’ll find a lead. None so far, though.”

“You’ll locate those ignoramuses, Nelson,” Maurice stated past a mouthful of MRE. “You’re the most nonpareil cyber invader I know.”

“I swear, Williams,” Robin said, “no one here needs a dictionary or thesaurus. We learn our big words from you.” It was a common statement. More often than not, she only understood his speech from context, yet she was getting better over time. It was a game her comrade was fond of playing, first beginning soon after the team was established. Williams was more than capable of speaking like a normal person.

Williams took a sip of water, then put it down, his gaze distant. “Woebegone that we mislaid our compeer, Robin.”

Gunfire. Rounds streaking past. Running for your life, firing over shoulders at the enemy. Too many! Sounds of bullets striking flesh. A single outcry of agony. The thud of a body striking dirt. “CLIFF!”

Robin leaned back, her eyes unfocused and glassy. “Launch was my second partner, and I’m very, very sad that he’s gone. He went honorably in the line of duty.” She used more force than necessary for her next bite. “Thank you for your

sympathy.”

Lennox moved to stand, his MRE platter empty. “Eat up, you all.” He paused to cast a pointed look at Takin, who was still on the laptop. “Takin, you have patrol at 0300 hours in Section G1. Williams, you and Conners are on guard duty at 0800 tomorrow. See you at breakfast.”



The peace after the monotony was simply *amazing*. Everything Nicole was working on was finished. The icing on the top was the gratifying sense of accomplishment in her latest R&D designs.

Nicole slumped in her office chair, letting her head fall back so she was looking up and behind her. It was a very interesting view of her office. The painting of the mountain looked strange, like a white and green stalactite.

Succumbing to her inner child, she pushed her feet against the floor, propelling her swiveling chair in a circle. She kept her head hanging so that she was outside the center of the spin. A moment later she braked and sat upright.

“Ooh, my stomach,” she groaned, holding her abdomen. The room continued to careen around her, and she placed her forehead on the desk. “Ooh, my head. . . shouldn’t have spun around like that.”

“Have fun?”

The unexpected voice caused Nicole to jolt, which immediately reminded her of her nausea. “Ugh. . . How long

have you been standing there?”

Jasmine smirked. “Long enough,” she chuckled.

“Ever hear of knocking?”

“Ah did, but your chair’s squeakin’ drowned meh out.”

Nicole frowned, rubbing her temple with a few fingers. “My chair does *not* squeak. Did you need something?”

Jasmine took a few steps forward and placed a bundle of papers on Nicole’s desk. “The mail came. *They* wrote. Ah signed for it.”

“Again?” Nicole said in dysphoria.

The young Louisiana woman nodded. “Again.”

Reaching out, Nicole rifled through the mail. “Thank you. Is that all?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jasmine gave her a mock salute before pivoting sharply and striding out, closing the door behind her.

Nicole sorted the mail to different areas of her desk. Bills went in front of her computer monitor. Junk went in the far corner, closest to the trash can. Everything else Nicole kept in front of her. There was only one thing in the ‘Everything else’ pile, and Nicole knew that starchy envelope far too well for her liking.

Leaving that particular item until last, Nicole threw away the junk and took care of the bills. She placed the payments in an ‘outgoing’ container of her desk, then reluctantly returned to the envelope at hand.

What do they want now? Nicole grumbled as she opened it. She muttered the first opening lines of all the other letters she had previously received. Her fingers unfolded the crisp paper.

The first words didn't match. As she read further, none of the paragraphs matched.

"They're serious this time. . ." she assessed, frowning. She folded the letter a few extra times before sliding it into a pocket, then shoved her chair away from the desk.

Jasmine, back at her position in the lobby, looked up as Nicole snatched a set of keys from the rack. "Where ya goin'?"

"Out," was all the reply the secretary received before Nicole slipped out the front doors.

Nicole found herself in the exact same position she had been in not long ago, rehearsing a speech as she trekked through the forest. She repeated herself over and over again, but this time she hadn't settled before she came across the dinosaurs.

They had moved from the open clearing to forest, where the trees grew far enough apart to allow the largest passage. A couple younglings played a variance of Hide-and-Seek and Tag amongst the lounging shrubbery and trunks while the adults looked on and either conversed or grazed, depending on the diet type.

Announcing herself with a hoot, she looked around for Freedom.

As if anticipating her return, the Utahraptor appeared from behind a thicket, multiple hatchlings and younglings of various breeds at her tail. "Nicole!" Freedom said, coming to a stop a respectable distance away. "Welcome back."

Nicole's greeting was barely off her tongue before she was swarmed by juveniles. They leapt up on her, the tallest managing to place its front limbs on her shoulders. Claws punctured her clothes, affectionate nibbles dug shallow, bloodless trenches in her flesh. Nicole stumbled over a baby Ankylosaurus as she struggled to greet each one individually while defending herself.

“Freedom, help me!”

Freedom replied indifferently, “They're just saying hello.” Her fringe twitched, betraying inner amusement.

Nicole winced as an Edmontonia stepped on her feet, and she prayed nothing had fractured. “Call off your attack greeters before I wind up as the base of a baby mountain!”

Freedom chuckled. “All right, little ones!” she rumbled in dinosaur-ese. “That's enough. Don't smother her.”



The juveniles obeyed, retreated to Freedom's feet and stayed there. A tiny Bambiraptor youngling, hardly taller than Nicole's ankle, was the last to leave Nicole's side. Nicole recovered her balance and dusted off her shirt and pants. She brushed her hands over the new snags. Nicole wore an expression of annoyance, but the glitter in her eyes told a different story.

"Babysitting today, Freedom?" Nicole inquired.

"Actually, I'm their teacher. As the tribe leader, it's my duty."

Nicole glanced around at the myriad of dinosaurs of all shapes, sizes, and diets. "I'm guessing that this isn't your typical tribe."

"Tribes used to consist of only one breed, but with our numbers so small now, it would be unnecessary division." The Utahraptor shook her head, discarding a faraway look. "Discussing our traditional communities isn't your reason for being here, though. Not with that expression on your face."

"You're right." Nicole cast a meaningful glance at the juveniles.

The Utahraptor got the message. Bending down to their level, she said, "School is over for today. Go back to your families. Tomorrow we'll learn about poisonous plants."

The hatchlings and younglings sprinted off in all directions. Freedom and Nicole were now alone.

"What is it, Nicole?" Freedom asked.

Nicole pulled out the letter. "It's the government. Although I don't believe you were expecting otherwise."

Freedom's expression darkened. "Nicole, we've been over this! Several times. You know my answer. It's still no!"

As irritated as she was, Nicole was nothing if not loyal to her country, and forced herself to continue. "It's not from the military this time. It's a personal plea from the White House. It's not just a question or a demand any longer."

Freedom harshly bit the air, muttering something in dinosaur-ese that Nicole didn't know. "I'm listening," she grunted in English.

Nicole read the letter aloud, putting as much emotion into it as possible. To her, it sounded like a tear-jerker, but Freedom stood deadpan throughout. When Nicole finished, she smiled endearingly at the raptor.

Freedom sighed. "A famous man from your history once said the he didn't want to become involved with those whose only objective is to gain power. Like that hero of your past, I just want for all of us to pass through the rest of our days undisturbed while we sojourn here. It's someone *else's* turn for war."

Sometimes, Nicole thought she had taught the Utahraptor *too* well. She shook her head. "Washington was always willing to render any essential service. Any help from you would be greatly appreciated."

"I *said*—"

"Look, there's a black operations team that's just lost another member. It's their second in the span of a single year. They're on the verge of finding the means to ending this war. Just one dinosaur, Freedom. One dinosaur for each member of four Black-Ops members, tiny ones that have the best chances.

That's four dinosaurs. Just *four*."

"But what next, if I send four?" the yellow Utahraptor countered. "Your government will want more. Four will become eight. Eight, 16, 32. You humans are relentless and stubborn and refuse to acknowledge reason when you encounter matters such as this," Freedom barked. "They wouldn't be in this mess if not for insatiable power-lust and the inability to get along."

"Please, Freedom. If they want more than four of yours, then I'll refuse any requests for more. I'll even face prosecution to keep you all out of their hands."

"Will you? Can you avoid prosecution by reminding this country of its virtuous forefathers? Reasoning with people who justify any means to an end is fruitless." Freedom looked away, her jaw tightly clenched. "You know how I feel about this," she said slowly, "but I will reconsider. *But know this*: My final word will be final, and I won't want to hear another word on this subject."

"Agreed," Nicole said. "Thank you, Freedom."

The Utahraptor nodded and walked away.



Nicole typed efficiently on her computer, but her mind wasn't on her work. Every few seconds, her eyes would dart to the clock. Impatience was a great way to make time crawl, and Nicole wasn't enjoying it one bit.

She looked back at the computer screen and realized that her typing had dissolved from professional to childish.

Nicole refocused her attention to where it should be as she hit the delete key and started over. For the next half hour, she developed a rhythm and stubbornly stuck to it.

A knock on her office door jarred her from her groove. “Come in!” Nicole said, her train of thought derailing back onto the “Will Freedom agree?” track.

The door opened a crack and Jasmine poked her head through. “Ya have some visitors on the front porch,” she stated.

Nicole stood so fast her chair almost tumbled over. “Visitors? As in plural?”

“Yep.”

Nicole’s hope heightened as she dashed past the secretary and down the hall. *Freedom wouldn’t send more than one messenger to tell the same message.*

When she reached the front porch, she saw three Pterodactylus and a Bambiraptor. They had taken seats next to the stairs. The avians perched on the banister, and the raptor laid back casually in a rocking chair.

“What does Freedom say?” Nicole requested eagerly, kneading her hands.

The largest Pterodactylus, Assail, said, “We four hereby volunteer for active duty.”

Thankful, Nicole gestured toward the door. “Come in, please.”

Assail nodded and took flight, the other two Pterodactylus followed. The Bambiraptor slid off of the rocking chair, landing with a soft *thump* on the wood, and trotted after

them. Nicole led them down the hallway back to her office. Employees who were in the way plastered themselves against the walls as if Nicole was leading her retinue. They watched the dinosaurians' passage in awe.

Back in the office, Nicole cleared off some desk space, shuffling piles to the side willy-nilly, and directed the pterosaurs to land there. The door was shut, and curious onlookers outside were thus encouraged to resume their duties. While the Bambiraptor commandeered a chair, Nicole went to her work bag and pulled out a thin, plastic measuring tape and a datapad.

"Please, hold still," she instructed as she measured Assail. She frowned when the flexible tape twisted over itself, and she paused to quickly fix it. "I know you, Assail, but who're the others?"

Assail held very still, only his beak moving as he replied. "The brown one is Rush, my protege. The gray one is Gale. And the Bambiraptor is Shriek."

Nicole nodded as she jotted down notes. "How old is Rush? He's very small." Thinking one of the measurements erroneous, she murmured an apology as she wrapped the tape around the pterosaur's neck again.

"Almost adult," Assail replied, even as Rush's beak opened. Rush capitulated, directing his gaze aside. "He is small because he was born that way."

"Can all of you speak and understand English?" Nicole beckoned Shriek, coiling and uncoiling the measuring tape around her fingers idly as the pterosaurs made room. Shriek soon became front and center with plenty of space for maneuverability. As Assail had functioned as a sort of practice

run, Nicole was able to gather the measurements expediently.

Since she had moved on from him, Assail nodded. “Yes, but Gale prefers our language over yours.”

Nicole eyed Gale. “Understand that you *will* have to speak English at times. I’m the only person who can understand dinosaur-ese, and I will not be with you to translate.”

Gale bobbed her head in affirmation. “Understood,” she clarified in dinosaur-ese.

“Do all of you understand the risks involved in volunteering?” Nicole continued. “You’re going to be partners for a black operations team with the goal of finding a way to end the war. Once you leave here, no one can guarantee your survival.”

The brown Pterodactylus, Rush, appeared to collapse in on himself mentally. Nicole could see it in his eyes. This was *not* the appropriate temperament for a willful soldier. She was tempted to consult Assail about his choice, and made eye contact with him.

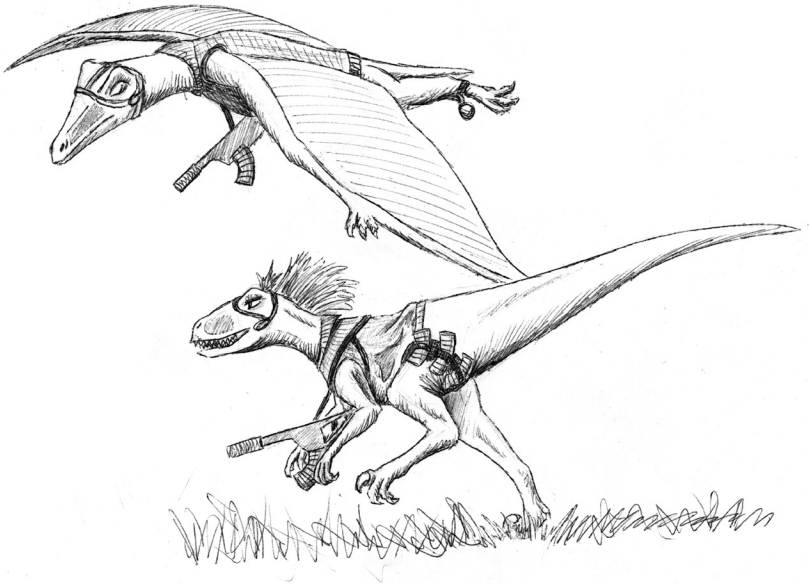
“Ma’am, yes, ma’am!” Shriek exclaimed with a grin, reaching up to deliver a snappy salute. “We know the risks, Miss Nicole!”

Assail met Nicole’s gaze smartly, and followed her meaning when she subtly gestured to Rush. Demeanor sure, he conveyed a slow nod. Nicole demurred, but returned the nod.

A silence fell, broken only by the scratching of the pen as Nicole jotted down numbers. Once she was through, she pursed her lips in thoughtfulness while rolling the tape up. “You may go back into the Reserve. Please stay with the tribe

until I come to send you off.”

“Understood,” Assail responded.



CHAPTER THREE

Rush fidgeted on the hard seat. His feet and wings were not used to the smooth surface, gently contoured for a human's posterior and its relative comfort. Glancing at his companions, he could see that they didn't look nearly as nervous as he felt, not unless they were hiding it. In fact, Shriek seemed almost ecstatic that they were going off to fight. She was jittering like a hummingbird, bouncing in her chair.

Gale was not quite a friend, more of an acquaintance with whom he was friendly. He did not know her all that well, mostly trivia of the blasé kind. But they both remembered the horrors of living in the valley, Pre-Portal. Surely, *she* would have more dubiety on this entire enterprise. He was aware of how affected Gale was by the constant terror back then.



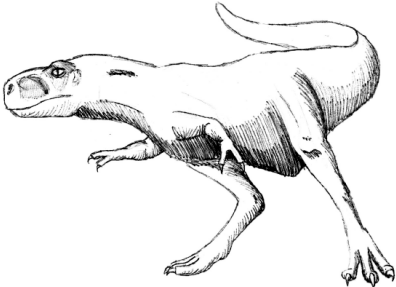
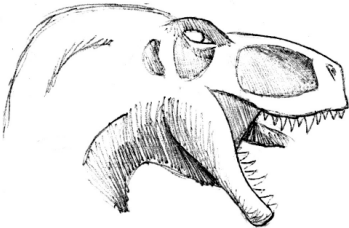
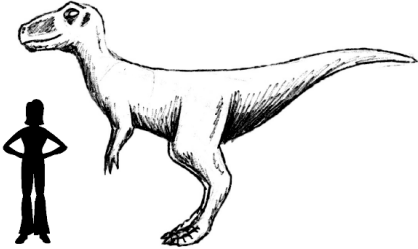
THE ENDANGERED
DINOCTIONARY™





ALBERTOSAURUS

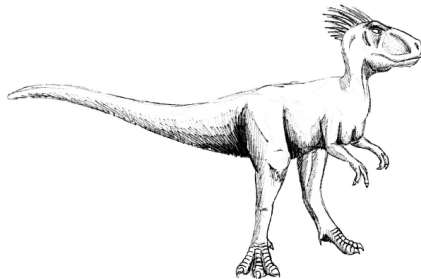
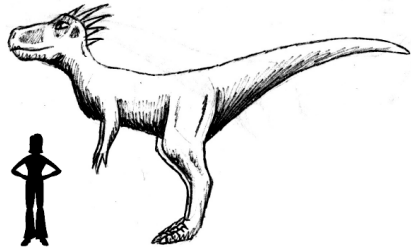
Pronounced: al-BERT-oh-sawr-us
Diet: Ground-dwelling carnivore
Home: Canada, Mexico, USA
Weight: 2.5 tons
Height: 10 feet
Length: 28 feet
Name Means: "Alberta Lizard"





ALLOSAAURUS

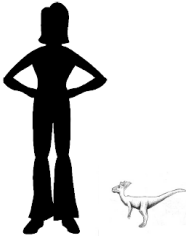
Pronounced: AL-oh-sawr-us
Diet: Ground-dwelling carnivore
Home: Canada, Mexico, USA
Weight: 1 - 5 tons
Height: 14 feet
Length: 32 feet
Name Means: "Different Lizard"

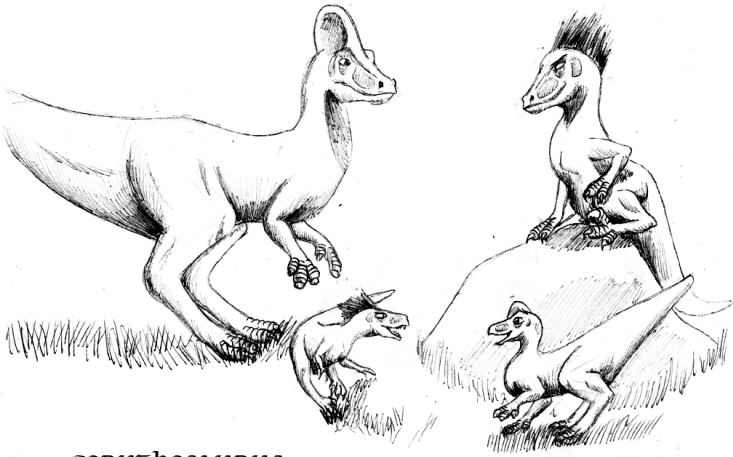




BAMBIRAPTOR

Pronounced: BAM-bee-rap-tor
Diet: Ground-dwelling carnivore
Home: USA
Weight: 7 pounds
Height: 1 foot
Length: 3 feet
Name Means: "Baby Raider"





CORYTHOSAURUS

Pronounced: kore-ITH-oh-sawr-us

Diet: Ground-dwelling herbivore

Home: Canada, USA

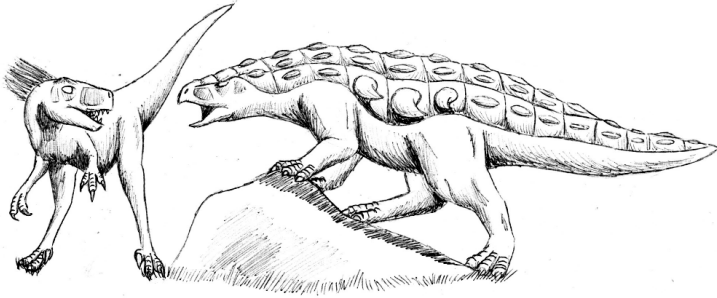
Weight: 3.5 tons

Height: 14 feet

Length: 33 feet

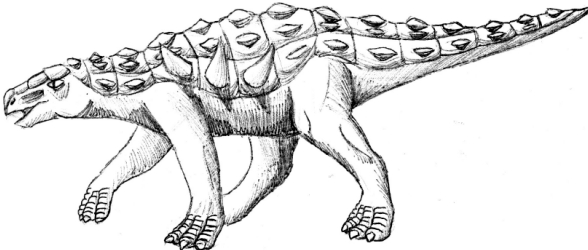
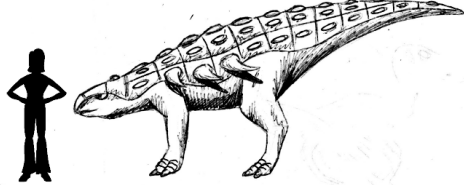
Name Means: "Corinthian Lizard"





EDMONTONIA

Pronounced: ed-mon-TOH-nee-uh
Diet: Ground-dwelling herbivore
Home: Canada, USA
Weight: 4 tons
Height: 9 feet
Length: 22 feet
Name Means: "Of Edmonton"





hesperonyxus

Pronounced: HESS-peh-RON-ih-cuss
Diet: Ground-dwelling insectivore
Home: Canada
Weight: 4 pounds
Height: 1.5 feet
Length: 3 feet
Name Means: "Western Claw"





MICROVENATOR

Pronounced: MI-crow-VEN-ah-tor

Diet: Ground-dwelling carnivore

Home: USA

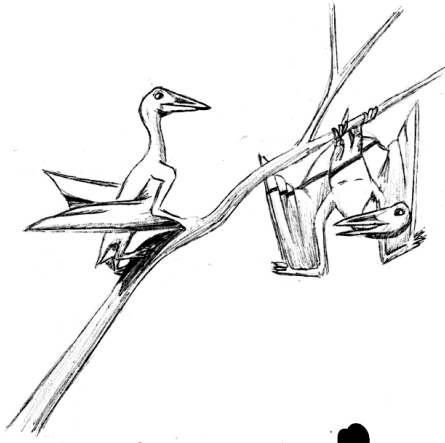
Weight: 7 pounds

Height: 2 feet

Length: 4 feet

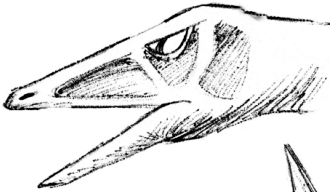
Name Means: "Small Hunter"





PTERODACTYLUS

Pronounced: TEH-roe-DACK-till-us
Diet: Aerial carnivore
Home: UK, France, Germany, Portugal
Weight: 10 pounds
Wingspan: 11 feet
Length: 6 feet
Name Means: "Wing Finger"





QUETZALCOATLUS

Pronounced: KEWT-zal-co-AT-lus

Diet: Aerial carnivore

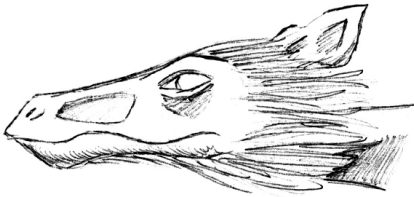
Home: USA

Weight: 55 pounds

Wingspan: 30 feet

Length: 29 feet

Name Means: "Feathered Serpent"





stigmoloch

Pronounced: STIG-ee-MOE-lock

Diet: Ground-dwelling omnivore

Home: Canada, USA

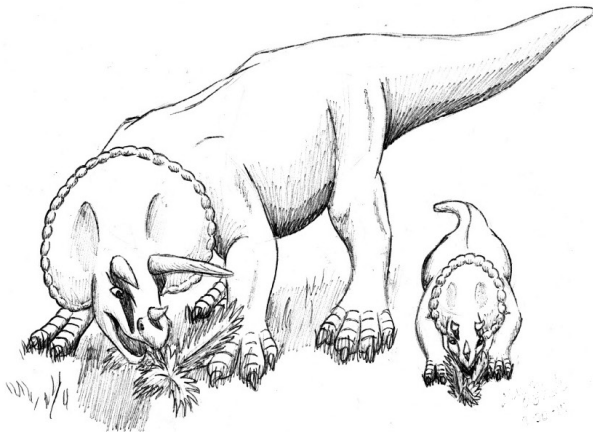
Weight: 440 pounds

Height: 5 feet

Length: 10 feet

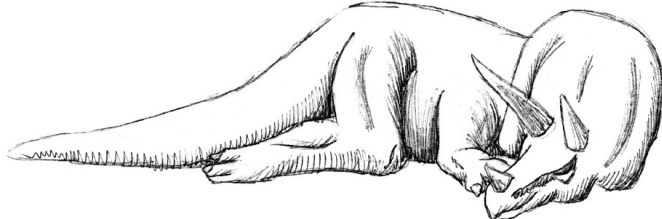
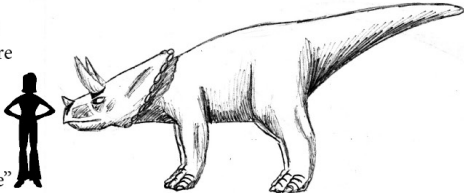
Name Means: "Styx Moloch"





TRICERATOPS

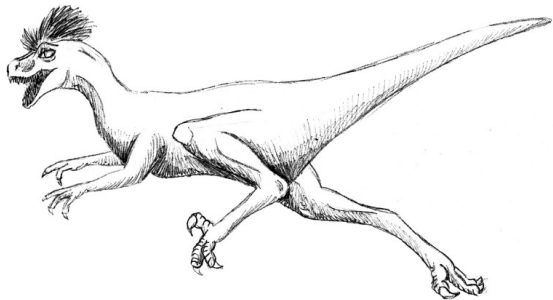
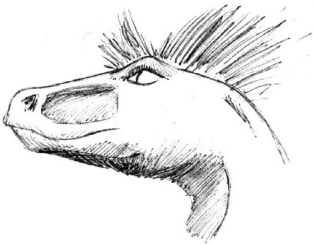
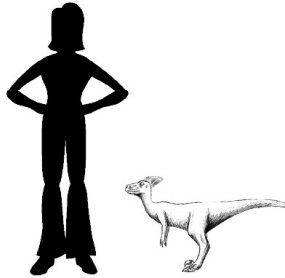
Pronounced: try-SARE-oh-tops
Diet: Ground-dwelling herbivore
Home: Canada, Mexico, USA
Weight: 7 tons
Height: 8 feet
Length: 28 feet
Name Means: "Three Horn Face"





TROODON

Pronounced: TRUE-don
Diet: Ground-dwelling carnivore
Home: Canada, USA
Weight: 110 pounds
Height: 2 feet
Length: 6 feet
Name Means: "Tooth That Wounds"





UTAHRAPTOR

Pronounced: YOO-taw-rap-tor
Diet: Ground-dwelling carnivore
Home: USA
Weight: 1 ton
Height: 8 feet
Length: 23 feet
Name Means: "Utah Robber"

