

‘A Very Jurassic Christmas Eve’

Corinna Turner

JOSHUA

Skating gently across the frozen lake, keeping my speed in check, I ready myself—and execute a little spin. Without falling on my rear. Yes!

I'm improving, but progress is slow, because I get only a few days to skate each year. Dad and Uncle Z drove north for a Christmas break every year since I was seven, just so that I could skate out in the open countryside instead of inside one of the looming, crowded urban rinks further south. Those invariably sent city-phobic me—wilderness-raised boy that I am—into a panic.

What was it like in the old days, before the crazy scientists and their arrogant assumption that they could contain the creatures they'd bred? Hard to imagine, and I don't waste time trying. So what if the world outside the fenced cities is harsher and more dangerous than it once was? It's my home, and I like it as it is.

Ecstatic at my achievement, I spin again—successfully!—and tear off down the center of the lake, gathering speed. I love the feeling of flying over the ice, so fast, so free. Out here on my skates, I could outrun even a raptor.

Of course, the rest of the pack would box me in fast enough, which is why the biggest Christmas gift Dad and Uncle Z gave me, year after year, wasn't the fuel, but their time, as they sat up there in the Habitat Vehicle's turret, getting anything but a holiday themselves as they kept watch over me. Uncle Z's up there now, carrying on the tradition. Only one pair of eyes, the last two years, but that's how it is now.

Pushing away the sadness that twists in my stomach at the thought of Dad, I bend my knees and pile on the speed even more, my heart pounding with healthy effort. I'm sixteen now, and after nine years I can stay up on my feet really well, but I'm only just getting to grips with the fancy maneuvers. I'm certainly not gonna try to spin going at this speed!

The icy wind whips in my face, fluttering my coal-black hair against my forehead, though I always cut it before it's long enough to get in my eyes and block my gun sight. Yes! This is the life. Okay, so I prefer the milder climate of Exception State, really. But I do so love to skate.

"No closer to the far shore, Josh." Uncle Z's voice startles me, coming from my earpiece.

I raise my head, my concentration broken, wobbling slightly as my eyes scan the snow-blanketed bushes, slopes, and beach coming up ahead.

"Whoa!" I jam my right skate in front of my left one, bringing myself to a rapid halt, heart pounding even harder.

Emerging from the nearest undergrowth is a . . . yes, a fully grown female allosaur, thirty feet long with a mouth full of razor-sharp four-inch teeth. Uncle Z laughs his head off in my ear, entertained by my emergency stop. He let me get nice and close on purpose, didn't he?

"Very funny, Uncle Z! Aren't you supposed to be on watch?"

"I'm keeping watch better than you, dreamer boy," comes the chortling reply. "Well, she's a skinny, mangy old creature, ripe for culling, doncha think? Let's not look a Christmas gift in the mouth. Bounty on an allo will pay for some of that fuel we burned coming all the way up here."

I eye the huge predator. Same upright conformation as a raptor or T. rex, though far bigger than the largest raptor species and only a fraction of the size of a T. rex. Resembling a rex more than a feathery raptor with her bare, leathery hide, only a crest of display feathers tops her head. She's thin all right, her ribs showing starkly, but I'm close enough to see that she's *not* old. Or mangy. Just starving. Why? She's moving well enough, and there's no wound that I can see.

She stops at the edge of the frozen lake, stretching her head toward me, nostrils flaring. Close to drooling. Oh yeah, she's hungry.

She actually raises one big clawed foot and places it tentatively on the lake, then draws it back as a creaking boom sounds from the ice. I'm perfectly safe. She's far too heavy to venture out here. She stretches her neck, shuffling her feet, never taking her eyes from me. Having a meal so close is torture.

"Ah, I'll put her out of her misery for you," says Uncle Z. "Stand still until I give you the all clear."

I hear the *chink* of Uncle Z's rifle touching the bars around the turret as he makes sure the muzzle is unimpeded, then the snap of his safety catch coming off. My earpiece will filter out the volume of the shot, so I need only stand and wait.

Something moves in the bushes behind the hungry allosaur. What the . . . ? Surely it can't be . . . ?

But it is!

My hand flies up, palm flat. "Stop, Uncle Z!"

"What's wrong?"

"Look. Coming out of the bushes . . ."

They're fully visible as they toddle down the beach, one, two, three of them, clustering around the female's stocky legs.

Allosaur chicks. The female is a hungry mom.

DARRYL

"How are things going, Darryl, my girl?" calls Dad as I approach the family room.

"Things are as ready in the kitchen as I can make them," I tell him as I enter, wiping my hands dry on my jeans before reaching up to re-tie my shoulder-length brown hair. "Soon as people begin arriving, we can start warming the cider. Half an hour before, we can slide the pecan pies into the oven. I put the cream in the jugs already and the plates are stacked, everything's ready."

"Good job. Can you help Harry with the chairs while I go drive the fence early?"

Yeah, I was expecting he'd do it now. He won't want to later, and it's better to check it before we have a load of extra people on the farm for the evening. "Sure, Dad." But my heart sinks a little. I was kinda hoping that with the catering all ready I could go drive the fence with him, have a few minutes off. I love when it's our turn hosting the Christmas Eve carol service, no mistake, but I've been on my feet working from dawn until . . . well, it's not dusk yet, but the sun's certainly dropping in the sky. "Is Father Ben here yet?"

"No, not yet."

"I thought he said he'd be here mid-afternoon?"

Dad shrugs. "He sent a heads-up when he left as usual—taking the mountain road—but he's running late. He should've come over the last pass half an hour or so ago, so he'll be here any time."

Distress signals rarely make it to the satellite from that winding minor road through the towering mountains that split Exception State in half, and the timid or less experienced driver will invariably drive all the way around on one of the main highways. But it's a really significant shortcut so Father Benedict, being neither timid nor inexperienced and with four wheel drive, invariably heads straight up and over.

Since it's actually only a carol service, not Mass, Father Benedict's kinda optional, but he'll preach a good homily, and he sings nice and loud. Some folks, like Dad's childhood friend, our neighbor Maurice Carr—who claims he only comes for the refreshments—aren't that enthusiastic at belting out the carols.

My insides clench at the thought of the Carr family. Maurice's wife, Sarah Carr, is really sick and won't be coming tonight. But she's insisting that Uncle Mau bring the children, just

as usual. It's no secret, though, that all four Carr children will be as motherless as Harry and I, within a few months. Which is worse, knowing it's coming or having your mother snatched from you in an instant in some stupid farm accident? I shake my head. There's no good way to lose your mom, especially when very young.

"Right, I'm fence-bound." Dad traipses out, passing my younger brother, Harry, staggering under an armful of the folding chairs we use for Sunday Mass.

I head to the hall cupboard to fetch more. It's the only event of the year when we need every last one.

"I wonder why Father Ben's so late?" Harry pushes his shorter brown hair behind his winter-pale ears with both hands as I return with my own armful of chairs.

"Something came up, I guess. Well, he'll be here any minute. Let's finish this and get our afternoon chores done."

Soon enough we've squeezed all the seats we can into the family room, spilling out into the doorways to the hall and dining room, and we're putting the finishing touches to the decorations.

"There." I straighten a big red bow on the front door and put my hands on my hips with a satisfied nod. The farmhouse's steel shutters are all open, proclaiming the efficiency of our twin Renfield Ozone 4 electric fence, and Dad's even circled the turret on top of the house with little fairy lights. Harry, having arranged a cheerful Christmas hat on the head of the little statue of Saint Desmond on one side of the door, is carefully draping the dainty, red velvet cloak that Mom made years ago around the Our Lady statue opposite. "I think we're ready. Let's get the chores done, then we can shower and change and hang out with Father Ben when he arrives."

"Okey-dokey." Harry bounces off toward the barn as though he hasn't been working just as long as me.

"Don't forget to check on that sick edmontosaur in the handling barn," I call after him.

Was I that energetic at eleven? I mean, fourteen's hardly old and decrepit, is it? I sigh, reflexively check my ScreamerBand, although I'm outside already—no alarms have been tripped, the fence remains unbreached and secure—then head to the young stock barn.

Soon, I'm dropping the calf feeder over the side of the bovine pen. I give only a few quick scratches to the eager butting heads as they crowd forward to drink, then trundle the much bigger 'milk' trolley along to the other, larger half of the barn, where the 'saur calves are kept carefully separate from their fragile mammalian bottle mates.

Plugging the pump tube into the milk trolley—which actually contains green liquid feed mix, but it's the same consistency as milk so we tend to call it that—I switch it on, then lean over the fence, looking into the pen—lowered, of course, like all 'saur handling pens, though here the concrete walls drop only two meters. "Dinner, y'all," I call. A pair of two-month-old male edmo calves—brothers—and a single female iggy calf, all three already as tall as I am and weighing five times as much, lumber up to the feeder. The twins latch onto a teat each, while Janey the iggy raises her flat head level with me, her beaky mouth parted hopefully.

"Just a quick scratch," I tell her, obliging. "I've got to hurry!"

I rub the itchy spot behind her jaw for a few moments. "Okay, enough, Janey. Go have your milk."

I've no bovine calves left to individually feed, but one runty little iguanadon is still on the bottle. I move to the end pen and let myself in, clucking encouragingly until the gangly little male iggy gets to his feet and totters forward as I step inside the safety ring. Only coming up to my chest and being very weak, it's still safe to come in here with him. A bigger calf could crush this little metal rail just by leaning on it too hard.

"Good boy." I offer him the bottle, and he takes the teat readily. He can graduate to the feeder soon. I don't scratch him as he feeds, except for massaging his chin to encourage him

to start sucking again when he loses interest. It's not a good idea to make pets of male stock. The few top quality males we kept as stud animals are always sold to other farms, with only good, sound females remaining here as breeding stock. Janey is in, with a good chance of staying, if she carries on growing so well.

Soon, he's emptied his bottle and, after checking him over, I'm collecting the empty milk trolley and calf feeder and heading back to the mix room to wash everything. I'll feed my charges again just before bed—probably with a gaggle of hyper younger guests trailing after me, tonight—and again first thing in the morning, Christmas Day or not.

Reaching the farmhouse again, I eye the empty yard and frown, my stomach chilling. Still no Father Benedict. Where is he? I check the time on my ScreamerBand. Only an hour until the service is supposed to begin and well over an hour since Dad said he'd arrive any minute. Heading inside, I'm checking the House Control console for messages when I hear Dad's farm truck stop in front of the house. He's done with the fence.

"Anything?"

I glance over my shoulder, shaking my head, as Dad strides into the house. "Nothing. Just his heads-up message from earlier."

Dad's mouth tightens, and he raises his ScreamerBand to his mouth, pressing the talk button. "Harry, get back here and grab your rifle. We're going to find Father Ben."

He lowers his wrist and glances at me. "Darryl, start the . . ." He hesitates, and I can guess what he's thinking. The hunting truck has a rudimentary turret, allowing better defense, but the normal road truck has stronger towing capabilities. Father Benedict's van is a heftier vehicle than some mere car, and there's little doubt now that he's stopped somewhere in the mountains. *Broken down* being the far preferable scenario than *crashed*, though both are extremely dangerous.

Dad makes a face. "Start the road truck, I guess."

Yeah, neither vehicle is perfect for this.

"And do the safety checks," he adds.

Okay, he's really worried if he's going to trust me to check the grilles and wheel shields so we can get away quicker. Dad always does the checks himself.

As I place a hand on the scanner of the gun locker, he presses the 'record' button on the console and starts leaving an audio message saying where we've gone and asking our neighbors Riley or Maurice, whoever arrives first, to finish preparing the refreshments and entertain everyone until we return. It's almost a two-hour drive to the far side of the mountains plus forty minutes to reach the first pass, though I'd bet Dad's about to do it in thirty. We're going to be late getting back.

My hand trembles slightly as I lift my rifle from the rack and head outside, Father Benedict's bright eyes and cheerful laugh filling my mind.

Lord, please let us be in time.

JOSHUA

"What the—" Uncle Z bites off a word Saint Des wouldn't approve of. "You messed up crazy 'saur, what you wanna go and hatch out chicks for in midwinter? How'd you even do it? Build your nest near the hot springs, huh? No wonder you're skin and bone, missy."

The allosaur ducks her head to check the chicks at her feet, then lifts her gaze to me again. She's clearly in dire need of food herself, but it's her chicks she wants me for. It's kinda touching. Not that I'm offering or anything.

"She's a good mom, though. Hasn't abandoned them yet."

Uncle Z snorts. "Or gobbled them up."

Yeah, many carni'saurs aren't great parents, especially if things get remotely tough. Allosaurs aren't the worst, but they sure ain't the best, either. "Well, I'm really impressed. Do we *have* to shoot her?"

"So am I, Josh, so am I, but she won't survive much longer without either cutting those chicks loose or eating them herself."

"Well, she hasn't eaten them yet."

"Okay, so say she doesn't eat them? All four of them will be dead in another week or two. Look at the snow. Prey's scarce; they don't stand a chance. Best thing we can do is cull the mother and catch the chicks. A zoo will be happy to have them."

Chink. He's raised his rifle again. But it seems such a cruel reward for her efforts. "Aw, come on, Uncle Z, it's Christmas! Can't we just catch them and leave her?"

A long silence in my ear. I'm asking him to pass over a good-sized bounty. The Dinosaur Activity and Population department (or DAPdep, as most people call them) don't like hungry allosaurs prowling.

Mama Allosaur sniffs the breeze and begins to pace around the lakeshore, the three miniature versions of herself stumbling along behind. Little carni'saurs like that, they should be bouncing around. They won't last much longer.

"Oh, fine. We'll try it, anyway. Now git back in here before she cuts you off."

Yeah, she's definitely moving to check out the HabVi. It's impossible to completely avoid odors remaining around a vehicle you live in all the time, all you can do is keep it down enough that it's too slight to interest something as large as a rex. An allosaur won't manage to break in, though she could do some damage trying.

Getting cut off is something I take very seriously these days, so I spin and skate quickly across the lake. Mama Allosaur shifts to a lumbering run, trying to keep up, so I pile on the speed until she falls behind. If she's too close when I come to shore, Uncle Z will have no choice but to shoot her.

She's only halfway around the lake's curve when I reach the bank, over which looms our armored house on wheels, with its huge off-road tires and full observation turret on top. Of course, struggling up a steep bank of frozen mud in ice skates is slow, but removing them would be even slower. But she's still at a comfortable distance when I let the side door hiss closed behind me and hit the lock button.

Unlacing the skates quickly, I pull them off. Huh, the brown skin of my fingers is almost blue with cold. That'll teach me not to wear gloves!

I scramble up the ladder to the turret without bothering to put my boots on. "How are we gonna catch them?" I ask, peering down. The mother is just approaching the 'Vi, the chicks straggling well behind.

"Unseal a pack of meat and chuck it in the rear pen. Then open the lower door section only."

Yeah, let the chicks come in, but not her. "Okay, I'm on it."

I slide back down the ladder in my socked feet—already chilling in this frozen climate—and grab a scent-sealed pack from the meat locker. It's the work of a moment to cut it open, place the contents in the back of the rear pen and lock the inner pen door again.

"Are the chicks here, now?" I call.

"Yep. 'Round her feet again. Open sesame."

I double-check the inner pen door, twice more—the way Dad and Uncle Z drilled into me from the moment I could reach the lock—and only then press the outer door control, lower flap only, looking through the observation hatch as it opens. A small square of daylight appears on the floor of the pen.

Right. Come on, chicks. In you come. You must want that meat. The chicks should rush right in, too young to be wary—

Mama Allosaur's big head appears in the opening, nostrils flaring.

No, don't you—

She sticks her muzzle in, grabs the meat and whips her head out again.

Argh! So much for being such a good mother! She'll have eaten that meat in one gulp! Fuming, I scramble back up to the turret. "Did you see that? What a . . ." I look down, and three little heads dip and raise and swallow as they tear pieces from the meal their mom's just provided. Oh. She took it for *them*.

"Uncle Z . . ." How can we split them up? It's *Christmas*.

At my tone, he shoots me a suspicious look. "What?"

"Couldn't we . . . I don't know, take them *all* to the zoo?"

His head jerks back. "*All*? The mother too? Since when were you so spatially challenged, Josh? We cannot fit an adult allosaur in our rear pen, and that's a fact. And the 'Vi would only just carry her weight."

"Nooooo . . . but . . . it *would* carry it. And . . ."

His glare deepens. "What?"

"Well, we could fit her body in the living area and her head in the rear pen. I mean, with her sedated and tied down, of course."

His lean, muscled hands drop onto his hips, thrusting out his belly, which is showing the effect of the lifelong diet of prime fried steaks, which neither Dad nor I have ever managed to persuade him to give up. "And her *tail*?" he demands.

"Well, uh . . . that would have to go in, um . . ."

"My bedroom?"

"Yeah." The cab 'bedroom' has always been Uncle Z's. "Only place for it." I mean, no way to drape the tail up into my over-cab bedroom.

"You know what that means?"

"Um . . . that you hate the idea?"

"Well, yeah, I do, but it also means I'd have to sleep in with you the whole way to whichever zoo was having them. And the best zoos—most zoos, period—are all further south, so that'll be several days, especially so heavily laden."

That dents my enthusiasm for the idea. Sometimes I can hear Uncle Z snoring even through my soundproofed floor.

"And the other thing . . ." Uncle Z smiles a little too broadly, like when he's about to clinch a deal. "We can't keep that monster tranquilized for more than two, three days tops, without causing her serious harm—or running out of drugs. So, say we do bring her on board with the chicks, then we have no choice but to pull up stakes at once and drive south, non-stop, spelling each other at the wheel, right through Christmas Day and the day after, to get her delivered alive and healthy."

He looks me straight in the eye. "So if we take her, the holiday ends right now. No more skating. No relaxing over Christmas. Just a 'Vi overflowing with carni'saurs, three of them trying to eat our fingers every time we take our eyes off them and the other near-certain death if we get the dosage wrong."

He smiles even more. "So Josh—it's entirely up to you."

DARRYL

I check the time on my ScreamerBand as we swing off the main highway, climbing toward the first pass. Twenty-seven minutes. Dad's worried, all right.

"Start keeping your eyes peeled, kids," he says, as the land falls away to our left, an increasingly dizzying drop opening out to the valley floor.

"We always keep our eyes peeled!" In the rearview mirror I catch the indignant frown Harry throws Dad.

"Oh, come on. You know what I mean."

I swallow and start paying close attention to that precipitous slope below. Yeah, Dad doesn't want to say straight out, *start looking down there for a smashed-up van*. No one could survive coming off the road here, not without a miracle. I make sure to spare the odd glance up the slope and around. Most of the 'saur's up in the mountains are fairly small—well, small to medium—but you do get the odd allosaur or similar-sized herbi'saur. Hitting something that big would bring our rescue mission to an abrupt—maybe permanent—end.

We clear the first pass, and there's the road ahead, visible—mostly—all the way to the second pass. No sign of Father Benedict. Where is he?

Dad drives as fast as he dares, every ounce of his attention on the winding road as he steers into the corners, accelerating down every straight bit. *Yeah, come on, Dad. Faster, faster!* We've got to get right over that second pass, now, before we can hope to find him. How long has he been stopped for already?

Something moves high on the upper slope, like a cloud of small specks rippling across the rocks. Just a shoal of itty-bitsy piranha'saur's. Deadly in those numbers, though.

I swallow. Raptors aren't the only threat to a smashed-up vehicle. In fact, piranha'saur's can squeeze inside far more quickly.

Dad must sense my churning anxiety, because he says, "Let's not blow this out of proportion, kids. Father Ben's got his priest hole, remember?"

True. The diocesan-issue sleeping vans aren't designed for overnighting unSPARKed—outside of an electric fence—they just give an itinerant country priest a berth any place without a spare bedroom. But like all the best vehicles that clock up many hours of unSPARKed travel, they have a small, man-sized compartment down in the chassis where the driver can take refuge in the event of a breakdown. Raptors have been known to break into the refuges, but only when help has been slow arriving.

So long as Father Benedict's been able to crawl in there, then even if he actually crashed and the vehicle was compromised from the moment he first stopped, he's got a few hours' extra time. Still . . .

Come on, Dad. Can't you go any faster? Not that I want to end up at the bottom of this mountain, either.

Finally, we're climbing to the top of the second pass. Still three more to go. But any moment now, we'll get to see at least some of the road ahead.

There's nothing, though. *Agh! Lord, please look after him. He works so hard for You. We're probably God's answer, though, aren't we?*

Father Ben, we're coming as fast as we can!

We round several more corners, the last one so fast that Dad slows down a little for the next. Drat.

But the steep bends give way to a gentler curve, the road disappearing out of sight around a shoulder of mountain. More of the road comes into view as we get further along.

Wait! Is that . . . ?

"Dad, something's glinting. Where the road's visible over that outcrop."

"Let's hope it's a windshield."

Yeah. An *intact* windshield.

JOSHUA

My gaze travels to the great frozen lake we're parked beside, the memory of flying over the ice filling me. We only got here yesterday evening. After Uncle Z slept in and we ate a

leisurely lunch, I've barely been on the ice for an hour. If we leave now, I won't get to skate again for a whole year. I'm old enough to know that any resolution to grit my teeth and go to a city rink will come to nothing. I love skating, but not more than I hate cities.

I turn to the little family below us. The mother's nose hovers just over the chicks and the fast-disappearing meat, nostrils flaring with longing, but she still doesn't snatch it from them. She would win allosaur mother-of-the-year award, no question. How can we take her chicks away and leave her? Okay, she'd probably get over them quick enough, but now she's in such bad condition her survival's far from guaranteed, in this climate.

"No more skating would stink, eh, Josh? It's a long time 'til next Christmas." Uncle Z's worried by my silence.

Oh, I want more skating. I do . . .

But there's a mother down there who wants her *babies*. My mother didn't want me. Did she, heck. But that little family down there we can keep together, if we're only prepared to put up with a few uncomfortable days.

But what about the skating?

I glance at the little image of Saint Des hanging over the front of the turret windows. Saint Des, the patron saint of hunters and anyone who lives out-city. Saint Des, so holy he lived with the raptors for twenty years, unharmed. *Don't be selfish, Josh*, his calm gaze says. *Especially not now, at Christmas*. Okay, so they're just vicious carni'saurs. But they're still God's creatures. Saint Des even splinted a raptor's leg once, didn't he?

"Let's take them," I say.

Uncle Z's jaw drops. "Josh . . ."

"You just said it was up to me. I say we take them."

As a frown settles on his face, inspiration strikes, and I add hastily, "Just think what they'll fetch. A perfect little family, completely out-of-season. No zoo will have naturally hatched 'saur chicks for three months, yet. Talk about scarcity value. And with a dramatic rescue story to go with them. What a winter attraction for the zoo that gets them! We'll hold an auction, right?"

From Uncle Z's sudden intent look, I've finally hit upon a reason for him to put up with this. He always was less sentimental than Dad. In fact, if *he'd* been my dad, I doubt I'd be here, not that I've ever doubted his love for me growing up. But it's just him and me, now, and we've still gotta balance the books, preferably without hiring an assistant to share our little moving home. Yeah, we're happier with just the two of us. Even if that means it has to be the six of us, for a few days.

He draws a deep breath, and I hold mine.

"Alright, Josh. You win. I'll get the tranquilizer gun. But this is gonna be one heck of a miserable Christmas." He swings down onto the ladder and shoots me one more glare. "And if I wake up Christmas morning with one of those things eating my nose, I'm blaming you."

DARRYL

As we round the outcrop, the source of the glint comes clearly into sight. It's Father Benedict's van. Pulled barely off the single-track road into a passing place, a little higher up the mountain. It doesn't look scrunched or bent, from here, just parked, but . . . my insides clench. Long, feathered tails wave from open doors. Dakotaraptors. I count four, just from here. Probably more inside and round the back.

"Ugh, should've brought the hunting truck," mutters Dad. "Well, break the windshield, Darryl, quickly."

On this narrow road, it's impossible to shoot through our side windows, and what's a little glass compared to Father Benedict's life? I grab the hammer and whack it into the center

of the windshield. Cracks appear at once, so I raise my feet and kick until the whole thing crumbles into little pieces and rains down over the dashboard and into the foot wells, bouncing off Dad's white knuckles as he clutches the wheel.

Harry's already leaned between the seats and poked the muzzle of his rifle through the windshield grille by the time I've righted myself and lifted my own gun.

Crack.

The range is long, and Harry's first shot kicks up a puff of dust to the right of a tail. I throw a quick glance up the slope at some straggly, windswept trees. Yeah, they're moving. "There's a stiff westerly breeze, Harry. Compensate."

Taking my own advice, I aim slightly to the left of another tail and fire. The tail jerks violently, and a large male raptor with blue-green ruff feathers backs out of the van and leaps around, feathers flying from its tail as it bites at the injured spot. I ignore it and line up my sights on the next tail. Right now, I just want as many of them away from Father Benedict as possible and distracted is as good as dead.

Crack. Harry's shot goes wide again, but only just. I say nothing, this time. He's trying his best and piling on pressure won't help.

Crack. My next target recoils from the vehicle. Ah-ha, a big female, yellowy-brown ruff. The pack matriarch? I try to get her in my sights—take her out and they may all run—but she's too quick. The instant her questing eyes fix on our approaching vehicle she darts behind the black van, calling sharply to the others. Heads pop from every door—*ah, thank you!*—I manage to hit one. So does Harry.

With an urgent screech, the matriarch breaks cover and streaks up the mountainside toward some crags. Just as I fire she takes one of her species' infamous, lightning-fast twenty-foot leaps, landing unharmed behind the sheltering rocks.

The surviving six raptors race after her, three adults and three juveniles—last spring's chicks, no doubt. I manage to drop the one I injured first, which is moving slowest, and Harry grazes another—DAPdep will have to get some hunters in to do some culling. Then they've all vanished among the crags, though I sense beady eyes watching us. If we put a foot wrong, they'll drop on us like lethal rain.

Dad stares up at the crags, frowning. He puts his hand on the window controls and drops all the side windows so Harry and I can shoot at the pack if they return.

I join Dad in eyeing the road ahead. There might just be enough space left in front of Father Benedict's truck for us to turn around. I glance at the drop and try not to gulp.

Inching alongside Father Benedict's van—there's barely room for a car to pass—Dad spins the wheel and backs up to the mountainside until we feel the thick rubber bumper nudge the rock. Spinning the wheel again, he pulls forward, peering through his window as the side wheels . . . well, it certainly feels like they're skimming the cliff edge. I try to loosen my grip on my rifle. It's not going to help if we go over, is it?

And then . . . phew, we're back in the middle of the road, and Dad's quickly backing up to Father Benedict's van. There's a click as he unlocks the trunk door. Then he looks from me to Harry, his lips tightening. Yeah, as the oldest, most experienced, best shot, able to provide the best cover, he needs to stay here. That means Harry or I needs to hook up the tow cable. And I'm a far better shot than Harry. *No . . .*

Harry licks his lips nervously, though his eyes brighten with heroic delight. "I'll do it."

"No, I can do it." I grab Dad's arm, but Harry immediately grips his shoulder.

"I can do it, Dad! It'll only take a second. And Ryl's a far better shot than I am. She has to provide cover."

Dad looks at me and makes a face. Yeah, though it kills him to let eleven-year-old Harry go out there, it's gotta be that way. This is no time for sentimentality. Harry will be safer with me and Dad covering him than I'd be with Dad and Harry for cover.

"Okay, Harry. But wait until I tell you. Just hop down, snap the winch hook into the tow ring and leap straight back into the truck, you understand? It doesn't matter what you see or think you see if you get a closer look at the van. You jump straight back in. Got it?"

Harry nods.

"You'd better. Because one of those raptors could be down here in about three seconds, and you know how hard it is to hit one in midair."

Harry nods again, more earnestly. Yeah, if a raptor comes down here, it will probably end up dead, but it might kill Harry first. Even without a bullet in her tail, the matriarch will be too wily to risk it, but a wet-behind-the-ears juvenile might disobey her. Let's hope she's a bossy-boots.

Dad and I take up our places by the side windows—me in the back and Dad in the front so we can drive straight off—and get our rifles into the best positions. We're kind of having to ignore behind us, but nothing large could possibly come up that precipice.

"Okay," says Dad. "Harry, go."

The rear door opens toward the cliff, unfortunately, providing no protection for Harry. Jumping out and crouching in the gap between the vehicles, he grabs the winch hook, turns and snaps it into Father Benedict's front tow ring. Giving it a yank to check it's secure, he straightens . . .

A shadow flits across the van. A second later, my eyes find the lethal-clawed shape springing down the slope, wing-arms spread for extra lift. One more leap, and it'll land on Harry!

Dad's rifle cracks, but the juvenile doesn't stop.

I aim, not even taking the time to breathe.

Lord-don't-let-me-miss!

JOSHUA

"I'd say she's about five thousand pounds." Uncle Z measures off the correct dose of sedative from the bottle. "But under the circumstances . . ." He draws out a quarter as much again.

It's quite an overdose, but I make no objection. I've been so busy worrying about the 'saur family, only now do I think about *my* family. An *adult* allosaur *inside* the 'Vi? This isn't exactly the safest stunt to be pulling.

I try not to bite my lip as Uncle Z waits for Mama-allo to be downslope of the chicks—in the hope she won't topple on them—then lines up the sights on her skinny thigh and pulls the trigger.

She starts, nudging the dart from her skin at once, but the force of the impact will have emptied the drug straight into her system. For a few minutes she stands, shaking her head, then she staggers. After only ten minutes, she goes down, but we monitor her for another ten minutes. No movement.

"Right." Uncle Z speaks decisively. "If we wait any longer a pack of raptors will probably turn up and eat all four of them. I'll go and see about winching her in. You close this hatch and don't open it until I tell you, understood?"

I do bite my lip, this time. Somehow, I pictured us both securing her, looking out for each other on the ground, but of course, with just the two of us, one of us has to provide proper cover. My sentimental whim is putting Uncle Z at risk, and if it's Mama-allo or Uncle Z, I'll choose Uncle Z any time.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea, after all. Maybe we should just grab the chicks and—"

Uncle Z snorts. "Oh no, you don't. Those four are a whopping Christmas gift from Saint Des, and I should've realized that myself. Just try and keep half an eye on her as well, will you?"

He slides down the ladder, shutting the hatch firmly behind him. In a few minutes he lets himself out the rear door, clutching our Utahaptor-sized metal-mesh muzzle—the largest we own—and some chains.

Okay, so we're not looking your gift'saur in the mouth, Saint Des, but . . . please don't let it bite Uncle Z's head off? Sleek, glossy, bright-eyed please?

DARRYL

Alerted by Dad's shot, Harry turns and dives for the trunk just as I fire.

The juvenile twitches midair, but crashes down on Harry, its weight dragging him back outside, where it lies on top of him, thrashing. I start to swing my gun round, but the shot could go through and hit Harry.

Snapping the safety catch on with my finger even as I reverse the rifle, I leap onto the raptor, slamming the butt into its head as hard as I can, trying to stun it. No, all I've got to do is . . .

I wedge a foot against its neck and shove its head to the ground, clear of Harry. It jerks, wild, uncoordinated, almost throwing me off. I've just got to hold it down long enough for—

Crack!

Dad's bullet takes it cleanly through the head and it's finally still.

"Harry! Are you okay? In, *quickly!*"

If he's so much as grazed himself on the pavement, the other juveniles won't be able to help themselves at the smell of blood.

"Fine . . . Jus' stuck . . ." Panting, he struggles to get out from under the dead raptor.

I try to lift it, feathers coming out in my hands, but it's too heavy. Dad absolutely cannot come to help or we'll have no cover *at all*. Ah-ha! I drag some of the tow cable from the winch, heave the raptor's head up so I can wrap it around its neck, then press the external winch button.

Whirr . . .

The winch isn't high off the ground, but it lifts the carcass enough that Harry finally manages to scoot out from under. I shove him up into the vehicle, then dive in behind, swinging the door closed.

Click.

Safe. *Thank God!*

JOSHUA

I keep half an eye on Uncle Z as he cautiously approaches the—apparently—unconscious carni'saur, gives her a few pokes, then moves close enough to whip the muzzle over her nose. It fits over the very end of her mouth—*just*—though he can't use the snap-catch and has lengthened the straps already. That in place, he secures her legs with normal chains, since the padded restraints we use on larger raptor species—which will only fit in the pen when sedated and folded in—are too small. We can take the chains off for a few minutes later and see about oiling her hide and wrapping some bandaging around to prevent sores. Right now, we just need to get her safely inside before any scavengers show up.

In between scanning the surrounding landscape for threats, I take a few peeps on the internal cameras at Uncle Z.

He opens up the rear pen completely, stowing the dividing wall, then hooks the winch cable to her ankles and draws her in. Plenty of cursing as he gets the huge tail stowed in his cab room, and I grin. Then he winches her in slightly further and finally gets the rear door closed.

Huh, so much for worrying about how to catch the little nippers. They've followed Mom straight into the 'Vi. I'm itching to go below. In fact . . .

"Josh? Get down here and deal with these little fluff-balls! I can't lash this beast down with them chewing on my elbows!"

Great! I open the hatch and slide down, grabbing the nearest chick in time to stop its sharp little baby teeth closing on Uncle Z's posterior. Again, by the look of his pants.

"Oh no, you don't!" The gaunt baby is about knee-high and squirmy. "Where shall I put them? Critter cages?"

"Nah, they need to stay right close to their mom or they won't smell right and she'll reject them. We'll have to leave them loose. Just keep them off me." He yanks another strap tight, securing Mama to heavy rings in the 'Vi floor.

"Okay. Come on, you three, stick with me." They're kind of cute. In an—*ouch*—sharp, pointy way. I get them some more meat and start teaching them to take it nicely and not bite me, an achievable goal since we've got them so young, although right now it just involves a lot of nips from them and plenty of slaps to their noses from me. "What shall we call you, eh? Two little boys and a girl. Hmm."

I eye their mother. "Well, *you* should be called Star, 'cause you're a star mom." The crest feathers on her head are even a yellowy orange. "Yeah, and it's Christmas. So that means you three should be, hmm . . ."

The chicks are downy all over, though one day they'll have bare hide same as their mother. I touch the female's head, the fluffy beginnings of longer orangey crest feathers soft under my hand. "So, I name you Gold." I move my hand to the two males in turn, greenish fluff and cream fluff. "Frankincense and Myrrh. What do you think, Uncle Z?"

He grunts, hauling on another strap. "Couldn't care less."

"Well, you should. Good festive names will just make the zoos even more eager to get them. And you did call them a gift from Saint Des, so we should appreciate them."

"All right, they're good names, a great present from Saint Des, I'm setting up the auction as soon as I'm done with this; I'm properly appreciative, really. Just teach them not to bite before you worry about teaching them their names, or our chances of having any sort of Christmas dinner are *zero*."

"I'm working on—*Ouch!*"

Uncle Z chuckles. "Oh, and Josh?"

I suck my bleeding finger. "Yeah?"

"Merry Christmas."

I stop trying to remember how many boxes of scentBlock bandages we have in the medicine kit, a smile stretching my lips. Yeah, it's dusk now, it's Christmas! And things aren't going badly, are they? We've got all four of our hapless guests safely aboard without anyone—in either family—getting eaten. Star is snoring hard and almost completely secured, and we've even named them! Okay, so it's gonna be one weird Christmas, no mistake, but . . .

It's still Christmas, right? And wasn't the first Christmas all about trekking off somewhere they didn't really wanna go, with a baby on board? And they ended up sleeping in some sort of tiny mammal-stock barn, didn't they, cheek to jowl with the animals? With the baby in the feeding trough, which I picture looking something like the little soundproofed box Dad used to pop baby-me in if I started crying at a dangerous moment. Yeah, you could

say we're doing Christmas properly this year. Authentic travel and scramble and stuff we'd rather wasn't happening.

Which are we, though? The family . . . or the innkeepers? Huh.

Well, it's a *proper* Christmas, either way—even if we'd rather it wasn't.

"Merry Christmas, Uncle Z!"

Darryl

The truck's engine roars as we tow Father Benedict's van—and the dead raptor—along behind us. We've winched the vehicle right up to our bumper, lifting the front wheels off the ground to side-step the handbrake, which is surely on.

"You really are okay, Harry?" Dad asks over his shoulder. "The claws didn't get you?" Although clearly desperate to get in the back and hug us both, he started driving at once. Father Benedict could be hurt or *anything*, back there. Time to get emotional later.

"Fine, Dad." Harry's still panting slightly. "Phew, when that thing dropped from the sky and landed on me . . . He shook his head. "I thought I'd had it. But it just wriggled around like it wasn't even interested in me at all!"

"It probably wasn't," says Dad. "Seeing that your big sis had just put a bullet in its chest." He shoots a glance up at the slope, now smooth, open, and treeless. "Right, this is a good spot." He draws to a halt and puts the handbrake on, then eyes Harry and me with the same look as earlier, his gaze fixing on me.

Yeah, we're not likely to get surprised here. Plus he doesn't want Harry to see . . . what might be seen, inside the van. "I'm on it, Dad."

"I can go." Harry sounds less enthusiastic than earlier, but willing.

"Darryl's turn. Get your rifle and find a good position to cover her."

"Okay." Harry obeys so meekly he's clearly still shook up. Who wouldn't be? When a raptor lands on you, you don't normally walk away.

Soon as they're ready, I ease open the side door, far side from the slope, and slip out, darting quickly along to the nearest free-swinging van door. I slip inside, not stopping to pull it shut. It's as likely to impede my exit as keep anything out, in its current condition. The dusk lighting outside provides little illumination and I peer through the gloom as my eyes adjust. The place is trashed, fridge door hanging open, but no sign of Father Benedict. Or blood, thank God.

Where's the priest hole? I don't dare call to him. A loud shout will carry too far and a quiet one will make me sound even more like prey. My fingers trace over the floor. There! A fiddly little lever, and another, and one more at the bottom. I get them up and slide the hatch away.

Father Benedict! He's there. Slightly younger than Dad, he lies on his back, one arm clutching two books to his chest, the other crossed neatly over it with his rosary looped around his dark brown hand, as though he's waiting to be buried. His springy, tightly curling hair is as neat and unruffled as ever and almost as black as his clothes, his clerical collar making a little spot of white in the dimness. His eyes are closed, his face peaceful. *O God, don't let him be hurt!*

I grab his shoulder. "Father Ben?"

He gasps; his eyes fly open, fix on me. A huge relieved breath comes out of him.

"Darryl!"

"Come on!"

He's already sitting up, scrambling out. He's right behind me as I lead him straight back to the truck. And then we're inside, the door closed.

Slumping in a rear seat, he shuts his eyes for a moment, his lips moving silently. Still clutching his books and his rosary.

"What'd you bring those for?" asks Harry.

"He had them in the priest hole with him," I say, annoyed with him for risking his life by taking the time to save them.

Father Benedict opens his eyes at last and smiles. "They're *leather-bound*." He displays them, his Bible and prayer book. "Raptors would chew them to shreds. And this . . ." He pools the rosary into his palm. "Well, I *needed* this. My SOS signal, you know. My lifeline. Worked, didn't it?"

Harry grins, and I can't help smiling too.

"Were you *asleep*, Father Ben?" I have to ask.

He reddens. "Ah, no. Not asleep. Just, er, composing myself." At our blank looks, he mumbles, "I thought the raptors were getting that hatch up at last, is all."

That doesn't mean much to Dad and Harry, but remembering the peaceful look on his face . . . it strikes me deep.

I don't have time to dwell on it, because Dad climbs into the back and drags Harry and me into his arms at last. We both put out an arm and scoop Father Benedict into the hug too.

"I don't need a *single other gift* this Christmas." Dad's voice shakes slightly.

"Nor do I." My voice muffles against a shoulder.

"Me neither," says Harry, with feeling.

"Nor I!" says Father Benedict—most fervently of all. But after only a moment, he adds, "Hmm, much as I hate to break this up, aren't we supposed to be welcoming the Divine Infant with joyous song right now?"

"We are," says Dad. "Let's get underway, then."

I poke Father Benedict and give him a firm look. "*You* are having hot cider and a slice of pie before we begin!"

"We all are." Dad speaks even more firmly.

"I won't say no to that." Father Benedict's hand shakes slightly as he gives mine a quick squeeze. "*Christus natus est. Deo gratias.*"

"*Deo gratias*," I echo.

"*Deo gratias*," murmur Dad and Harry.

Christus natus est. Christ is born.

Let nothing distract us from *that*, huh, Father Ben? Not even a pack of hungry dakotaraptors. Priorities and all that.

Christ is born.

And life goes on.

Deo gratias.

###

To learn whether Darryl and her family manage to have an uneventful Christmas and to find out what befalls Joshua, his Uncle Z, and their dangerous passengers Star, Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh on their long journey south, check out the full *unSPARKed* Christmas special, A VERY JURASSIC CHRISTMAS. Or grab *Please Don't Feed the Dinosaurs*, the first *unSPARKed* story, now.

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