

RUBY'S FLIGHT

Jurassic Judgment Short

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AS RUBY CAME BACK to consciousness, pain signals screamed from her lower body. She tried to block them out without any success. How ... or rather, why did she hurt so much? Her eyelids fluttered open, then pinched closed at the brightness—a white light tinged with green. Where was she?

She rolled onto her side, which brought a sharp pain in her right shin. All other sensations of pain receded. Maybe that was her only injury? But why would she be injured in the first place?

The terrifying memory came rushing back and shook her to the core. The helicopter. The pilot yelling about engine failure. The other two passengers gripping handholds with white knuckles. Her head spinning as the helicopter spiraled down in a dizzying dive until a mass of trees broke through the front windshield.

She was lucky to be alive, assuming she was alive. But she had to be. There wouldn't be pain in heaven.

She forced her eyelids open. Delicate emerald leaves crowded in front of her face. Her head was buried in a bush. It would have been lovely, except for where she must have crash landed—Extinction Island. The helicopter had been flying over the island when it went down.

A scratchy cry came from behind her. She jerked up and flipped around, wincing at another pain in her shin bone. She'd probably broken it, but she didn't see any blood, at least.

At the base of a nearby tree, a baby dinosaur shifted on its feet. From the short arms and elongated snout, it had to be some sort of a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. But it stood only two feet tall. Wrinkles of skin hung from its jowls and arms. It must have hatched recently.

As she sat staring, it gave another cry and ran off. To its mother?

What in the world had she been thinking when she accepted this prize to ride in a helicopter over Extinction

Island? The caller from the radio station had been so excited to inform her she'd won a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see dinosaurs from the air. Yeah! More like an end-to-her-lifetime chance to get eaten by a dinosaur. Her sense of adventure had always gotten her into trouble.

Unless this was all a bad dream. Maybe she was cuddled up on her couch with her German shepherd right now. If only she could be gazing out her front window as the snow peacefully peppered the surrounding farmland.

A metallic creak to her right cut off her line of thinking. The helicopter had come to rest five feet off the ground between two huge trees, as if the trees were cradling it. That was the proof of her horrible reality. This was no dream.

Were the others still alive? There had been the pilot and two "lucky" winners besides herself: a man from New Mexico who had marveled at the greenery on the island and a woman from New York who'd said she worked at a museum and had always wanted to see flesh and blood dinosaurs.

Ruby crawled toward the plane because crawling seemed safer than putting pressure on her lower leg. By the time she reached it, the sounds of the jungle had begun to increase her anxiety. Predators would certainly be attracted to the sounds and smells of a crash.

At the landing skid, she pulled herself up and peered through the missing door. The faces of the pilot and the woman passenger held vacant looks. The other man must have been thrown clear like her.

Before she went to search for him, she grabbed a first aid kit that she spotted under the seat. Using some medical tape, she wrapped her shin tight. Now she might be able to walk.

After about fifteen minutes of searching, her limping hobble brought her to the man. His body looked normal, but his neck was twisted unnaturally. He had passed on too.

Ruby turned her back to him, dropped to her knees, and sucked in several deep breaths. Panic rose in her chest, but she

forced it back down. To survive, she had to focus. She was alone and injured on an island full of dinosaurs and convicts with no way to get home. Her worthless cell phone was probably lost in the jungle somewhere. The pilot had warned them that regular cell phones wouldn't have service, but she'd had it in her hand because she wanted to take pictures of the animals.

A deep roar rumbled through the jungle. She couldn't stay here. But she had to see if the pilot had some sort of satellite phone. It might be her only way off the island.

She returned to the helicopter, steeling herself for the gruesome scene, but before she could poke her head in, the deep roar sounded again ... right over her shoulder.

Slowly, she swiveled her head around. A tall, skinny dinosaur—something like the Wilt Chamberlain of *T. rexes*—tilted its head at her curiously. But this wasn't the "friendly stranger at a party" curiosity. It was more like a "sample the appetizers to see if they're tasty" kind of curiosity. It swung its head toward her.

Time to go.

She tucked her arms in, spun toward the ground, and rolled under the suspended helicopter.

The dinosaur couldn't follow her, but that didn't deter it.

By the time she emerged on the other side, it was barreling through the trees in a circle to intercept her.

She had no choice but to run as her leg protested. With each step, a stabbing pain shot up to her kneecap.

The dinosaur took out small trees, bushes, and vines in pursuit of her. She wouldn't be able to outrun it for long.

She ran past a tree that had a strange marking carved into it: several splayed out lines with a circle in the middle. Was she entering some convict's territory?

No time to worry about it. The predator stomped and crashed behind her.

She tried to push her legs harder, but the right one buck-

led, throwing her momentum off. She stumbled through a vine curtain and came out to a wide-open space.

A cliff!

She was about to go straight over. Her arms backpedaled, as if doing the backstroke, before her hand grasped something rough. A rope.

She seized it and hung on.

Instead of pulling her back, the rope shifted, carrying her legs over the edge.

She hung in midair over a fifty-foot drop to a creek below. But the rope held, and she didn't fall.

The dinosaur broke from the trees, slammed into her, and sent her careening in a circle.

Its knife-edged teeth nipped at her legs but missed. It was already balancing on the edge.

Then it tipped over, falling as she completed the circle and swung back to the cliffside.

A mighty roar echoed for a second, followed by an earth-shaking thump.

She collapsed to the rocky ground, her breath coming in gasps and her leg throbbing in pain. And yet, she clung to the rope anchor with shaking hands. It had saved her.

This time. But there were other dinosaurs out there. Hiding in the jungle where she couldn't see them. No way would she go in there again.

"Are you okay?" asked a feminine voice.

Ruby startled and twisted her torso around.

A woman in her midtwenties with dark hair and light skin emerged from the trees. She had bright blue eyes and held a long metal pole like a walking stick. Her concerned smile eased Ruby's anxiety.

"What was that?" Ruby asked, pointing over the edge.

The woman glanced down. "Looks like a *Giganotosaurus*. One of the biggest predators out there. Good job."

The praise didn't penetrate Ruby's armor of fear. Like saying "good job surviving the helicopter crash." Survival was solely a matter of being thrown clear or clinging to a rope.

It must have shown on her face because the woman said, "You didn't lie down and become prey. You fought for your life. That's all any of us can do."

She offered a hand to help Ruby up. "I'm Oakley. I saw the helicopter crash."

"Ruby." She took the hand and got awkwardly to her feet. "They're all dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Ruby frowned. "I didn't know any of them."

Oakley glanced down at Ruby's leg. "You're injured, but you can walk?"

Ruby nodded.

"I have a bunker near here with a sat phone. We can call to get you off this island. As brave as you are, you don't belong here."

Though no one would likely call her flight through the jungle brave, Ruby appreciated the sentiment. She swallowed past a lump of fear as she followed Oakley into the smothering jungle.

Not thirty feet in, a *Velociraptor* streaked across their path. Its sickle-like claws dug into the leaf litter as it passed. It wasn't big, but it could still rip her intestines out.

Oakley stopped and listened for a minute. Ruby heard it too. The raptor had turned around and was coming back.

With feet planted wide, Oakley took up a defensive stance with the metal pole sticking out in front of her.

Seconds later, the raptor leaped from behind a bush.

Oakey swiped the pole at the trunk of its body.

It slid to the side and hit the ground, vibrating like she'd zapped it with a Taser.

That was no walking stick. It was a lightning rod.

As the small dinosaur twitched, Ruby's pulse finally slowed. There was something about this woman she couldn't explain, but it wasn't malicious. Oakley had promised to help get her home. Ruby was banking her life on that promise being true.

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