Monday 29th June 2020

Edge of Extinction

Chapter 17
I wondered if I would ever get used to this topside world. As I ran after Todd, every breath scraping up my throat in a wheezing gasp, I decided the answer was probably not. Growing up in the filtered, monochromatic quiet of the compound made all the colours and smells and sounds up here overwhelming. There were so many things I wanted to look at but couldn’t because I needed to watch where I was going. I managed to catch a glimpse of a bird here or a chattering squirrel there, but I always paid for it with a rather painful face-plant and an irritated look from Todd. And while I appreciated the beauty of the fallen leaves, moss and tiny patches of multicoloured flowers we ran over, I also found them annoyingly uneven. I caught myself longing for the smooth compound tunnels and almost laughed out loud at myself. I’d spent a lifetime wishing for exactly what I was doing right now, running in the fresh air and the dappled
green light that shone down from the trees. I just hadn’t imagined it being so uncomfortable.

My feet were killing me. My new boots were wonderful, but the blisters from the day before were still raw, and the bottoms of my feet felt bruised. Todd kept us at a brisk trot for what felt like hours. His face was a thundercloud, and it was clear that talking was out of the question. Except for the occasional glare or snide remark when Shawn or I tripped, he didn’t say much. I tried to mimic his constant state of wary watchfulness, but it was impossible. He saw things ages before I did, heard things I couldn’t and smelled things I didn’t even notice. Watching him, I realised that Shawn and I had been too relaxed the day before. I’d thought we were safe in the thick trees, but Todd made it obvious we were not.

I was so busy thinking about how stupid we’d been that I almost ran smack into Todd’s back when he pulled up short.

“Look there,” he whispered, pointing through the trees to our left. I looked and spotted a small pack of dinosaurs, no taller than my waist. They were pawing underneath a fallen log, and as we watched one of them let out a high-pitched shriek as it came up with a fat bullfrog clutched in its jaws. Immediately the dinosaur next to it ripped the frog out of its jaws and swallowed it whole. The first dinosaur squealed in rage and went after the thief.

“What’s so special about them?” Shawn huffed, his hands on his knees. “We’ve seen little dinosaurs like that all day.”


“Really?” I asked, looking again. These dinosaurs were a muddy brown instead of the flashy greens and reds of an adult T. rex. And while the adults had a smattering of thin, whisker-like feathers on their heads and backs, these had thicker feathers covering large portions of their body. Camouflage, I realised. The young dinosaurs blended in with the forest floor. The giants that roamed the open areas must send their young into the trees for protection. The youngsters crouched on all four feet, using their front legs to balance out their well-muscled back half. Their forelegs must stop growing soon, I thought, picturing the adult T. rex’s useless front legs.

“I forgot this area was a T. rex breeding ground,”
Todd whispered. "Roderick only marked your map for the trip to Lake Michigan. If he’d known we were going this way, he could have warned us." He trailed off, and I knew he was remembering that Roderick was dead. I pulled my map out and Todd silently pointed to a spot to the right of my dad’s original path. We were still heading north towards Lake Michigan, but we were now heading there at an angle instead of the direct route my dad had drawn. The miniature T. rex pulled their heads up to stare at us, their eyes bright and intelligent. Todd motioned for us to follow, and we were off and running again, leaving them to fight over the discovery of another frog.

Shawn and I kept up with Todd for another hour as he led us through the woods. He seemed to know instinctively exactly where the thickest trees were and led us out of our way to avoid any dinosaurs we came across — all while running at an almost unbelievable pace. I gritted my teeth, determined not to be weak, but I was worried if we kept our pace up much longer, I was going to pass out. “Todd,” I finally called, “if you’re trying to kill us as payback for getting your village taken, you might just get your wish.”

Todd stopped and looked back at us, taking in our sweat-drenched shirts and Shawn’s bright red face. Todd wasn’t breathing hard at all.

He frowned. “What’s the problem?”

“We can’t run much longer,” I said, as Shawn dropped to the ground and started digging out his canteen. When he finally found it, he stared at it a moment, as though he’d forgotten that he’d given up his smooth metal compound one for the dingy glass one from Adler’s. Then he shrugged and took a long drink.

“I think I hacked up a lung about a mile ago,” he wheezed. “Don’t worry. There is a fifty-fifty chance I’ll survive without it.”

“The air up here is too thick,” I complained.

“Too thick?” Todd said. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s the humidity,” Shawn said, taking another long drink. “The compound didn’t have any. We had filtered and recirculated air with a higher oxygen content to make up for the increased carbon dioxide levels of the tunnels.”

“Whatever,” Todd said. “We can walk awhile, but I want to get as far as possible before dark.” He turned and started walking swiftly through the woods, his
bow drawn. I offered Shawn my hand and helped him up.

"Why does he have to be so fast?" he groaned.

"Because he wants to survive," Todd called back.

"What is with the freakishly good hearing?" Shawn muttered to me.

"Different question, same answer," Todd replied, and I had to grin. I hurried to catch up with Todd. Shawn was right; I practically had to jog to keep up with his ground-eating strides.

"I know I've already said it," I told him, "but I am so sorry about what happened." Guilt was gnawing at me. I needed him to tell me we were OK before it ate me alive—even if it wasn't even close to being OK.

"I know you didn't mean for it to happen," he said, puffing out his cheeks and looking at me. "But I would forgive a lot quicker if Shawn didn't keep defending the people who took my mum."

"Yeah, about that." I sighed. "You have to understand that in the compound, the Noah's word is law. He's the world's protector, the reason we've survived this long. Every rule, every law, every everything in the compound is to ensure the survival of the human race. Shawn never could have imagined them capturing a village like yours. He couldn't even imagine a village like yours existed two days ago."

"And you have to understand that out here the Noah is somebody to be feared," Todd shot back. "He's a dictator who brainwashed the human race into thinking that they had to give up their independence to survive. According to Jett, the Noah will stop at nothing to keep power. Nothing. Even if it means eradicating the last pockets of freedom and acting like they never existed. And after what I just witnessed, my version of your precious Noah looks a lot more accurate." I stopped walking and stared after him, struck dumb as I tried to reconcile his version of the Noah with my own.

"What was that about?" Shawn huffed, catching up with me.

"Nothing." I frowned as I started walking again. "Just friendly small talk."

"It didn't look like Todd was feeling too friendly. Not that I can blame him."

I nodded, my mind churning as I thought about everything Todd had said. The Noah he described was not the Noah I'd learned about in school or heard from during mandatory assemblies.

I leaned over and picked up a fallen leaf so I could
I glanced up from my shredded leaf to see that Todd was now twenty feet in front of us.

"Hurry up," Todd called. "And get out your bows. They aren't going to do you much good strapped to your backs."

Shawn and I hurried over, fumbling to unstrap our bows. After watching us struggle, Todd sighed and stopped to help us. He spent a minute or so adjusting our grips and tightening the bowstrings before nodding in satisfaction.

"OK," he said. "Let's go."

"What are we shooting at?" I asked, confused.

"Nothing," Todd said.

Shawn looked confused. "But shouldn't we have an arrow out?"

Todd shook his head. "I don't feel like getting shot today, and that's just what you'll do the first time you trip." Shawn looked down at his grass-stained knees sheepishly. "Until you get comfortable with the bow," Todd said, smirking, "and walking, you don't get any arrows."

"Is this how your dad taught you?" I asked.

"Yeah," Todd smiled. "I had to carry my bow around for a whole month."
“Did you feel like an idiot?” Shawn asked, gesturing to his bow. “Because I sure do.”

Todd laughed, and the tension that had been hanging over us ever since we left the Oaks eased.

“What was it like to grow up topside?” I asked, wanting to keep Todd talking. I liked the easygoing, joking Todd we’d met in the woods the day before. This sombre, moody Todd put me off balance. He had every right to hate us, but I hoped he wouldn’t.

“Topside,” Todd said thoughtfully as he started walking again. “You two always call it that, but I’ve never known anything different.”

“We were like that in the compound,” Shawn said. “Until I was five, I always thought that the topside was just an interesting bedtime story.”

Todd shook his head. “I can’t imagine that.”

“Did the Oaks have a school?” I prompted. “You knew how to read.”

“Not very well,” Todd said. “We don’t have a fancy school like you compound moles. A few people still have books, and Jett required that everyone know how to read by the time they were ten. He didn’t want the skill to die out. Mostly we learn how to do useful stuff, like hunt, fish, build and garden. When you turn sixteen, you’re apprenticed to someone in the village. I was going to ask to be Roderick’s apprentice.” He frowned. “He was going to teach me all about maps, so I could be a trader like my dad.”

“But who did you trade with?” Shawn asked. “Certainly not the compounds.”

Todd snorted. “Definitely not. There are three other villages within a week’s travel of the Oaks. My dad used to make the trip to trade goods with them. And we trade with Ivan. He used to come to the Oaks about once a month. Now if you want something from Ivan, you have to go to him. I haven’t seen him in years.”

“You said he was a dinosaur hunter?” I asked. “That can’t be a real thing. Can it?”

“You just wait and see.” Todd smiled. “If his house is the same as I remember, you’re in for a real treat.”

“Has anyone ever tried to improve your pulley system?” Shawn asked, and I smiled as we fell into easy conversation. We shared stories about our lives and grilled each other about the oddities of each other’s upbringing, and I almost forgot that we were walking through dinosaur territory. Almost. The bows in our hands served as a helpful reminder.

“We’ll stop here to eat,” Todd finally said, indicating...
a small cave built in the side of a large rock formation.
“My dad and I used this as a breaking point when I
was a kid,” he explained as he shrugged his pack off
and let it fall heavily to the ground. “I was too little to
make it very far in one day.”

Shawn followed suit, rolling his shoulders gratefully.
“I could have gone another couple of hours, but if you
need to rest, that’s no problem.”

Todd let out a laugh. “Yeah, right. Sit down before
you fall down.”

I glanced at Todd. “Is it OK if I go over there?” I
pointed to a clump of thick bushes about thirty yards
away.

“Yeah,” Todd said, looking confused. “But why?”
I felt my face grow hot. “Um…”

Todd’s own face flushed. “Oh, yeah. That’s fine.”

I headed for the bushes to relieve myself. The boys
had been able to take care of this necessity as we
travelled, but I was much too self-conscious for that.
Being a girl could really be a pain.

I was just heading back towards the boys when
something made me stop. My skin prickled into goose
bumps. Some ancient survival instinct made my heart
rate quicken. I wasn’t alone. Every muscle tensed,
waiting to explode. Green scales flashed to my left,
and I was running in an instant.

“Run!” I screamed as branches cracked behind me.
The dinosaur was too big to manoeuvre easily, and on
instinct alone, I began zigzagging through the trees.
My first impulse was to run back to the boys, in the
hope that Todd could drop the creature with his bow,
but as the trees flashed by me, I realised that I no
longer knew which way that was.

A feral roar sounded behind me, so close that my
heart almost stopped in sheer panic. I commanded
my muscles to move faster, and I began frantically
scanning my surroundings for something, anything,
that might save me. There was nothing. On a hunch,
I dived suddenly to my right and doubled back,
forcing the creature to spin. I gained a few yards, but
it wasn’t enough. Terror roiled through me. Think, I
commanded myself. Think or you’re dead. I felt one of
my new knives bouncing on my arm and ripped it out.
It was a long shot, but it was something. Whirling, I
took aim and flung the knife. As it winged towards my
attacker, I realised what a futile effort it was. The tiny
blade looked laughable as it bounced off the creature’s
shoulder. It roared angrily, not even slowing down as
I turned to run again. Great, I’d just made it mad. And I’d lost ground. Brilliant.

The creature was gaining on me. Teeth snapped together only inches from the back of my head, and I knew that this was how I would die. There was movement off to my right, and I realised that the dinosaur might be part of a pack. I prayed that it would be quick, that the creature would break my neck and not rip me to shreds while I was still alive. Suddenly a sharp twang ripped through the air past my right ear and the dinosaur let out a bloodcurdling screech. The sound made me stumble, and my exhausted muscles faltered. I was falling. Time seemed to slow as I twisted and ripped my last knife from its holster in one movement. I thrust it out and felt it connect with hard scales right before everything went black.