

The Velociraptor

Tim found the silence chilling.

The velociraptor was six feet tall, and powerfully built, although its strong legs and tail were hidden by the tables. Tim could see only the muscular upper torso, the two forearms held tightly alongside the body, the claws dangling. He could see the iridescent speckled pattern on the back. The velociraptor was alert; as it came forward, it looked from side to side, moving its head with abrupt, bird-like jerks. The head also bobbed up and down as it walked, and the long straight tail dipped, which heightened the impression of a bird. A gigantic, silent bird of prey.

The dining room was dark, but apparently the raptor could see well enough to move steadily forward. From time to time, it would bend over, lowering its head below the tables. Tim heard a rapid sniffing sound. Then the head would snap up, alertly, jerking back and forth like a bird's.

Tim watched until he was sure the velociraptor was coming toward the kitchen. Was it following their scent? All the books said dinosaurs had a poor sense of smell, but this one seemed to do just fine. Anyway, what did books know? Here was the real thing. Coming toward him.

He ducked back into the kitchen.

"Is something out there?" Lex said.

Tim didn't answer. He pushed her under a table in the corner, behind a large waste bin. He leaned close to her and whispered fiercely: "Stay here!" And then he ran for the refrigerator.

He grabbed a handful of cold steaks and hurried back to the door. He quietly placed the first of the steaks on the floor, then moved back a few steps, and put down the second. . . . Through his goggles, he saw Lex peeping around the bin. He waved her back. He placed the third steak, and the fourth, moving deeper into the kitchen.

The hissing was louder, and then the clawed hand gripped the door, and the big head peered cautiously around. The velociraptor paused at the entrance to the kitchen. Tim stood in a half-crouch at the back of the room, near the far leg of the steel worktable. But he had not had time to conceal himself; his head and shoulders still protruded over the tabletop. He was in clear view of the velociraptor.

Slowly, Tim lowered his body, sinking beneath the table. . . . The velociraptor jerked its head around, looking directly at Tim. Tim froze. He was still exposed, but he thought, Don't move. The velociraptor stood motionless in the doorway.

Sniffing.

It's darker here, Tim thought. He can't see so well. It's making him cautious. But now he could smell the musty odor of the big reptile, and through his goggles he saw the dinosaur silently yawn, throwing back its long snout, exposing rows of razor-sharp teeth. The velociraptor stared forward again, jerking its head from side to side. The big eyes swiveled in the bony sockets. Tim felt his heart pounding. Somehow it was worse to be confronted by an animal like this in a kitchen, instead of the open forest. The size, the quick movements, the pungent odor, the hissing breath . . .

Up close, it was a much more frightening animal than the tyrannosaur. The Tyrannosaur was huge and powerful, but it wasn't especially smart. The velociraptor was man-size, and it was clearly quick and intelligent; Tim feared the searching eyes almost as much as the sharp teeth. The velociraptor sniffed. It stepped forward—moving directly toward Lex! It must smell her, somehow! Tim's heart thumped.

The velociraptor stopped. It bent over slowly.

He's found the steak.

Tim wanted to bend down, to look below the table, but he didn't dare move. He stood frozen in a half-crouch, listening to the crunching sound. The dinosaur was eating it. Bones and all. The raptor raised its slender head, and looked around. It sniffed. It saw the second steak. It moved quickly forward. It bent down.

Silence.

The raptor didn't eat it. The head came back up. Tim's legs burned from the crouch, but he didn't move. Why hadn't the animal eaten the second steak? A dozen ideas flashed through his mind—it didn't like the taste of beef, it didn't like the coldness, it didn't like the fact that the meat wasn't alive, it smelled a trap, it smelled Lex, it smelled Tim, it saw Tim—

The velociraptor moved very quickly now. It found the third steak, dipped its head, looked up again, and moved on. Tim held his breath. The dinosaur was now just a few feet from him, Tim could see the small twitches in the muscles of the flanks. He could see the crusted blood on the claws of the hand. He could see the fine pattern of striations within the spotted pattern, and the folds of skin in the neck below the jaw. The velociraptor sniffed. It jerked its head, and looked right at Tim. Tim nearly gasped with fright. Tim's body was rigid, tense. He watched as the reptile eye moved, scanning the room. Another sniff.

He's got me, Tim thought.

Then the head jerked back to look forward, and the animal went on, toward the fifth steak. Tim thought, Lex please don't move please don't move whatever you do please don't . . .

The velociraptor sniffed the steak, and moved on. It was now at the open door to the freezer. Tim could see the smoke billowing out, curling along the floor toward the animal's feet. One big clawed foot lifted, then came down again, silently. The dinosaur hesitated. Too cold, Tim thought. He won't go in there, it's too cold, he won't go in he won't go in he won't go in. . . .

The dinosaur went in.

The head disappeared, then the body, then the stiff tail.

Tim sprinted, flinging his weight against the stainless-steel door of the locker, slamming it shut. It slammed on the tip of the tail! The door wouldn't shut! The velociraptor roared, a terrifying loud sound. Inadvertently, Tim took a step back—the tail was gone! He slammed the door shut and heard it click! Closed!

"Lex! Lex!" he was screaming. He heard the raptor pounding against the door, felt it thumping the steel. He knew there was a flat steel knob inside, and if the raptor hit that, it would knock the door open. They had to get the door locked. "Lex!"

Lex was by his side. "What do you want!"

Tim leaned against the horizontal door handle, holding it shut. "There's a pin! A little pin! Get the pin!"

The velociraptor roared like a lion, the sound muffled by the thick steel. It crashed its whole body against the door.

"I can't see anything!" Lex shouted.

The pin was dangling beneath the door handle, swinging on a little metal chain. "It's right there!"

"I can't see it!" she screamed, and then Tim realized she wasn't wearing the goggles.

"Feel for it!"

He saw her little hand reaching up, touching his, groping for the pin, and with her so close to him he could feel how frightened she was, her breath in little panicky gasps as she felt for the pin, and the velociraptor slammed against the door and it opened—God, it opened—but the animal hadn't expected that and had already turned back for another try and Tim slammed the door shut again. Lex scrambled back, reached up in the darkness.

"I have it!" Lex cried, clutching the pin in her hand, and she pushed it through the hole. It slid out again.

"From the top, put it in from the top!"

She held it again, lifting it on the chain, swinging it over the handle, and down. Into the hole.

Locked.

The velociraptor roared. Tim and Lex stepped back from the door as the dinosaur slammed into it again. With each impact, the heavy steel wall hinges creaked, but they held. Tim didn't think the animal could possibly open the door.

The raptor was locked in.

He gave a long sigh. "Let's go," he said.

He took her hand, and they ran.